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## THE IDLE PARENT

Tom Hodgkinson reads on: Buddha, can you spare a paradigm?

I hope you'll forgive me a moment of idle parent smugness. But I think this story helps to prove that a life of pleasure can continue alongside child-rearing.

I recently found myself at Castle Cary station in Somerset with three children in tow and an hour to wait for the train to Paddington. How would I cope? By nature lacking foresight, I had forgotten to bring

any toys or amusements. I sat down in the waiting-room among the other passengers and gave the eldest child some of those tourist pamphlets to leaf through, while the smallest one sat on my lap.

The kids seemed to be quite happy, so I gingerly pulled a book from my pocket. It was *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley, the 1953 classic that describes Huxley's experiences on mescaline.

It begins with a quote from William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." I read on. Huxley discussed the history of mescaline research. I stopped to answer a question about how long the train was going to take to arrive, and then carried on reading. Huxley swallowed four-tenths of a gramme of mesacaline and awaited the results. The children sat on the floor and played. I read on for eight pages.

As if this wasn't good enough, the lady opposite me, a grandmother, said: "I just wanted to say that I think it's absolutely wonderful that you are managing to read a book while looking after three children."

Inside I rejoiced. You see, world! Idle parenting works! You can feed your mind while the little ones learn essential skills of self-management.

Huxley has some thrillingly relevant ideas around idle parenting in *Island*. This 1962 philosophical novel tells of an oil company man's visit to the island community of Pala, which has developed a mode of living that combines the best of Western science with the best of Eastern mysticism: modern physics meets the Buddha.

*Island* is full of fantastic ideas for living, including what the Palanese call Mutual Adoption Clubs, or MACs. The idea is that each family connects itself to a network of 20 or so other families. At any time, a child from one can go and stay with the family of another for a while. This system provides an

escape valve from the confinement of the nuclear family. As Sulina, a Palanese mother, explains: "Escape is built into the new system.

Whenever the parental Home Sweet Home becomes too unbearable, the child is allowed, is actively encouraged – and the whole weight of public opinion is behind the encouragement – to migrate to one of its other homes."

The benefits to the child of taking a break from its parents are enormous. Have you noticed how your child seems more responsible and polite in other people's homes? And how life is made easier when your children have friends over?

The MAC idea is also a boon to the overworked adult: both parents are now expected to work full time and be "good parents"; to clean, cook, shop, earn money and pay bills and try to squeeze in some pleasure somewhere along the line. And the source of many of our problems is the nature of the nuclear family. It's simply too small. By extending the family, creating a network of mutually supporting friends and neighbours, in short, by helping each other, family life could be made very much easier. Let's give each other a break and open our doors.

❖ Tom Hodgkinson is editor of *The Idler*.



# Taking the lousy out of delousing

Tackling nits is a nasty business, but help is at hand from a new London salon that will do it for you, says **Tamsin Kelly**

If you have primary age children, chances are that nit warfare is a predominant feature of your life. There's that familiar sinking feeling as you read the standard school letter announcing: "There has been an outbreak of nits in your child's class." This is followed by combing sessions, which soon become a hideous chore, with child and adult equally tetchy. Organic treatments are laughably inadequate, while last-resort full-on chemical attack means eye-streaming, crispy-haired children held hostage at home for eight hours.

As a nation, we spend £30 million a year on over-the-counter potions on nits. But this very over-use of chemicals permethrin and phenothrin now means head lice have developed resistance; 80 per cent are immune to chemical treatments and infect nearly half of four- to 11-year-olds every year.

"They are a great opponent – I have a deep respect for lice," says Dee Wright, gleefully. Dee, 48, is the founder of The Hairforce and a self-styled lice assassin. Pre-children, she headed advertising campaigns for Tango and Pot Noodle; now she's developed a strange, but obviously satisfying, mid-life strategy for picking nits out of children's hair.

The Hairforce HQ is her former dining room in Primrose Hill, north-west London. There her crack squad of lice killers will rid your child of lice while you sit and read magazines. Best of all, your child will enjoy the experience

## THE NITTY GRITTY

- ❖ A full-grown louse can crawl 9in in a minute and is genetically programmed to move on to new heads.
- ❖ It is a myth that nits prefer shiny clean hair. They're not picky.



- ❖ Lice have average lifespans of 30 days.
- ❖ The female louse only needs to mate once (she simply stores what she needs to make nits throughout her lifetime), but she can lay 10 eggs a day.
- ❖ A nit attached to a fallen hair will hatch and can live off the head for up to 48 hours.

❖ The Hairforce: 07720 838 271, www.thehairforce.co.uk

because he or she will be sitting in a funky purple massage chair, lost to everything but the supplied personal computer games or cartoon DVDs. Dee wants to present this as "a pampering spa treatment for children" and is looking to franchise it nationwide.

She was determined to "bring some glamour to this issue", so her staff are dressed in white Barbarella-style costumes with purple logos promising "comb to kill". Wearing magnifying visors and with bright lights trained on your child's head, they painstakingly Hoover (don't try this at home – it's a special attachment), spray leave-in conditioner, comb with a Licemeister comb and nit-pick with tweezers.

Alexandra Masalina, 22, is one of 13 lice killers and loves it. "You have to be ruthless but it's satisfying," she says. In her first training session, she and Dee rid one teenager of 250 lice.

"I'd wanted to set up a business for a while when I read an article about a nit and lice removal service in New York and thought, what a great idea," explains Dee, mother to Mia, 12, and Ines, 10. "Personally, nits were never an oppressive issue for me, but I was aware from school gates talk how much of a problem they could be. The more I looked into the issue, the more I realised how reliant parents had become on a solution in a bottle – which in four out of five cases just doesn't work."

Parents have enough to do already, Dee adds. "A lot of



Good hair day: Tamsin Kelly and her children Emily, Oliver and Louis

mothers who multi-task with work, cooking and organising after-school activities find it very tough to then sit down and clear their child's hair," she says.

"We guarantee that we can give you some respite and clear your child's hair. But we cannot guarantee your child won't get nits again. One child whose head was cleared before Christmas was back again within weeks. The mother could pinpoint exactly when he'd been re-infected."

And there's the rub. A half-hour check at The Hairforce costs £20, while a delousing session, which takes an hour and a half, costs £30. Heavy cases can take longer – each extra half-hour costs £10. You need three clearing sessions with four days between each visit to break the cycle. That's a cost of

£90 minimum per child, with no guarantee that your children won't be rubbing heads with another lousy head within days.

Of course, there are people who are prepared to pay again and again for the luxury of someone else doing the lousy work. The Hairforce also offers discreet at-home visits at £120 a head each time, a service much in demand amongst the yummy mummies of Notting Hill and Chelsea. They also boast a celebrity following, though only Jonathan Ross has gone on the record about it, saying: "It's a brilliant idea. We used to dream of something like this."

It is a brilliant idea – and very cleverly branded with the costumes and kit. But I suspect for most harassed mothers it will remain just that: an idea.

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