

MUM'S THE WORD

This month our columnist is literally tearing her hair out with some uninvited house guests...

I like to keep this column real. Parenting is a messy business and while the picnics and cuddles certainly do happen, for the most part it's down and dirty and sometimes it's important to share these unsavoury aspects, just so you know you're not alone.

Which is why this month I'm writing about a problem we have in my house at present, one which has everybody scratching their heads. Quite literally.

Yes, today's topic is the '*Oh-my-God-I-want-to-jump-out-of-my-own-skin*' subject of head lice.

Now one big problem with having six children is that head lice seem to appear with alarming regularity. The reasons are two-fold. Firstly, my kids have a lot of hair: my daughter's hair is so thick it takes industrial sized hair elastics to contain it. Worse, my boys are allergic to haircuts, and the nine-year-old wears what can only be described as a bob – think Sony Bono in the 60s. Trying to point out that he looks a bit like a girl makes no impact whatsoever, '*I like it like this*' he lisps stubbornly, tossing his hair back with a flourish.

The second problem is that, despite having their own beds, the youngest three opt to sleep together, all tumbled over each other like sleeping puppies. Sometimes they take this little slumber party into my bed and it's not unusual for me to wake surrounded by a baby, three boys and a disgruntled husband in the mornings.

So you see, the combination of excessive hair and bed-sharing means our house has become a playground for hair-pets - the Promised Land of Cooties - where Mr and Mrs Louse, their 18 children, 302 grandchildren and all four elderly parents, have found a happy place to dwell. Little beggars.

Now the literature will tell you that head lice prefer a nice clean head, but I think they're just saying this to make mothers like me feel better. I say this because as a child I was scrubbed and washed constantly by my OCD mother, and I never got head lice. Not once.

The attitude to cleanliness in our house



is a little more relaxed. I toss the children into the bath together most nights, hair generally washed by squirting water guns at each other or squeezing a water-logged Tinky Winky over each other's heads. It gets the job done – sort of.

My first encounter with head-lice was several years back when one day I noticed my daughter tearing at her head. I leaned in for a closer look.

Peering down at her head I saw what can only be described as a colony of creatures busily going about their day; working, playing and raising their kids, blissfully unaware of my rising horror. I felt like Dr Seuss's Horton the first time he hears a 'Who', I was staring down at bleedin' Who-Ville! Panicking I pulled my son over to inspect his head, and sure enough another happy colony. Suddenly I felt an itch on my head, '*Oh God, we're all infested!*' I yelled, tearing at my hair as if it were on fire.

I was faced with two options: give everyone a buzz cut, in the manner of Angela's Ashes (a tempting option) or buy some lice shampoo (saner). Wisely I chose the latter.

Large bottle of lice exterminator in hand, I was about to learn another lesson about the critters – they're virtually indestructible. While our whole family gasped for air as the toxic fumes filled the room, the head lice soldiered on, refusing to die, (apparently they can hold their breath for two hours, a skill surely wasted on creatures who can only survive on a human head?).

It took several weeks of applying toxic shampoo, nit-combing and daily head-checking - a nauseating and thankless job – before we eventually had a lice-free house once more.

And so the pattern has continued to this day, like an annual pilgrimage to a favoured shrine, the hair-pets stubbornly return with regularity leaving me scratching my head in exasperation. So how the heck am I supposed to rid this family of these revolting freeloaders other than burning down the house or praying for a nuclear holocaust (which they'd probably survive)? I think it might be time to bring out those buzz-cutters after all...

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