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The Yummy Mummy's Ultimate Family Survival Guide

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Extract

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PART ONE

Bricks and Mortar



Laying the Foundations: An introduction

Families, eh? What a nightmare: it's all kids, marriages, oversized cars, arguments, stressful holidays, affairs, the school run, snotty noses, admin, tantrums and break-ups – who the hell would ever want to go through *that*?!

Well, funnily enough rather a lot of us take a stab at Family Life, and despite what you may have heard in the press about divorce rates rocketing, all men being bastards and children being less desirable than global warming and shell suits, families are having something of a revival. Hurrah!

After decades of monumental fuck-ups caused by wanting to Have It All, leaving a legacy of rich divorce lawyers and psychotherapists, it seems that an increasing number of people are thinking there may be more to life than high-powered careers, flat-screen TVs, mind-blowing sex and holidays in Barbados. Not much more, obviously, but a little, and perhaps something worth putting a good deal of effort into.

It is almost impossible to define a family these days, as any sense of what's 'normal' vanished years ago. I had a conversation recently with a friend who talked about her daughter's ex-stepmother's girlfriend. I got there in the end, but it was pretty confusing. Families

now come in all shapes and sizes: there are married parents, step-parents, step-children, cohabiting parents, gay couples with kids, small families, gigantic families, happy families, miserable families, and families you really wouldn't want to get stuck next to on a campsite. My own set-up of being married with three kids is probably far from the norm these days, but it works (mostly) for us.

Whatever the actual bricks and mortar of a family, and however you go about living in it, two things seem pretty clear: firstly, married (or effectively married) people are generally happier, healthier and more contented than those who aren't; and secondly, children brought up in stable family homes grow into happier, healthier and more contented adults. And thus the cycle continues.

But keeping it all hanging together – through the years of child-rearing, career changes, financial wobbles and the inevitable middle-age spread – is really hard, and I am yet to meet a single married person with kids who doesn't occasionally want to buy a one-way ticket to Rio and live it up a little! Happily these feelings of frustration, boredom and an interest in sexy beachwear usually pass quite quickly and we all get back to making packed lunches and putting away fifty pairs of socks before we get as far as finding our passports.

My theory as to why we find family life so challenging, even though generations before us stuck together like limpets, is that we are not trained or encouraged to commit to anything. Our lives are geared towards *change*, and fast change at that: we can return goods to shops should we decide blue isn't really our colour, throw things away if we don't like them any more, choose between a hundred television channels and swap electricity suppliers in one phone call. Nothing is 'forever' and choice is everywhere: if we don't like it, we move on and get something better . . . until we don't like that any more either. Our attention spans now compare with those of goldfish, and our children's are even shorter. In short, we are addicted to convenience, speed and choice.

Commitment? Hell, no!

When it comes to material things, all of this choice and ability to jump ship is rather good: if I want to get a better microwave, why

shouldn't I trade the old one in? If I buy a shirt for my husband that turns out to be a size too small because he's been eating all the pies again, what's the harm in swapping it for a bigger one? None. But family life cannot operate under these terms and conditions. It requires a completely different way of thinking: you are not *owed* anything – you all owe it to each other to be there, to help, to support, and to put the bins out on a Monday.

This book won't, I'm sorry to say, tell you how to reach the Nirvana of a perfect family life, because it doesn't exist. It won't bring you beautiful, well-mannered children, a fulfilling job, a perfectly risen sponge or a man who pays you compliments while remaining faithful for the next fifty years.

What it will do is take you on a journey through a family home, and, room by room, tackle some of the most common issues that face many families on a daily basis. Through my own (mixed) experiences of raising three kids and living with one man for thirteen years I will share my survival tactics for making it to the next wedding anniversary (see, there is an incentive to hang in there . . .) and there are handy hints and tips from some of my friends who have done the Family Thing too. There are some topics that I have omitted, such as going through a divorce, coping with teenagers or dealing with step-families, because I haven't been there and got the T-shirt yet. Give me a few more years, though . . .

Hopefully you will laugh, learn and be reassured a lot along the way, as I attempt to convince you that nobody does it perfectly, we all have our family troubles, and that with a little humour, patience, hope and plenty of good chocolate, you will get through the bad bits and thoroughly enjoy all the rest.

And so, ticket for the guided tour in hand, I invite you to make your way towards the start and prepare for some fun. See you on the next page . . .

Clash of the Tartans: Bringing two Families together

One day you marry a guy, and you become husband and wife. Or you don't marry the guy, but live with him long enough to know every hair on his stubbly chin, every album he's ever owned and when it's best not to tell him that he's making a pig's ear of some DIY. So far so as-it-should-be: you like him, he likes you, and life is rosy.

But then you go and spoil it all by saying something stupid like, 'Why do you always have tea before breakfast? We never did that in my family – we always had tea *with* breakfast, which is much better.' Aaargh! Why did you say *that*? Why should he care two hoots when your family – that's *your* family, not his – takes their tea, or that you think your way is better?

Well, he shouldn't, of course, and probably doesn't, but the point is that *you do*. Or, at least, you might not care all that much about the tea thing, but about a great many other small but habitual, ritual or comforting things that your family always did as you grew up, and that you think you'd rather like to carry on doing now, thanks very much, so let's stop this ridiculous tea-all-over-the-bedclothes lark and get up!

Bringing two families together is always bound to throw up this kind of dispute, and many far more serious ones. Everything from what time you get up on a Sunday morning to what you have for lunch (Sunday roast or beans on toast), how much telly you watch, where you go for Christmas, how to do DIY, whether women with kids should have a job and what kind of school you send your little angels to, is in some way influenced by your own family upbringing.

Christmas is a classic situation for conflict:

Christmas Day 2003

I want to go home. I feel like an alien here: nothing is as it was at Christmas when I was a child and it doesn't feel Christmassy to me at all. I want to be with my mum and dad right now, not with someone else's family. I know they're my family now too, but it's not the same at all. I feel I have to ask at every turn, in case

I do something which isn't traditional here, and it's really getting to me now.

Even in the most welcoming, adaptable, easy-going family there is bound to be some friction and even the occasional explosion, so it's best to be prepared:

- ☆ **Don't assume your way is right.** Many people fall into the trap of always assuming that if their way works, or has been handed down through even one generation, it is the Right Way, and everyone else is sadly misguided or stupid. Avoid wearing this arrogant, highly unflattering hat by keeping your eyes open for new and possibly better ways of living.
- ☆ **Do some detective work.** It's much easier to spot any potential clashes if you have studied your partner's background and rituals carefully. If no woman in his entire family has ever had a job, and has started child-bearing within six months of her wedding, then you might be foolish to assume he thinks any other way. It's unlikely that you've settled down with somebody who has wildly different views on life from your own, but it's often the little things that grate as badly. Learning about his family's traditions and habits will make it much easier to understand when he starts doing things that annoy you, like leaving the dishcloth wet after he's used it. Grrr!
- ☆ **Spot the problem before it becomes one.** (This is illogical, I know, but you know what I mean.) It's much better to talk about anything you find annoying or impossible as soon as you spot it. Once things have been left to take a hold they are very hard to stamp out. Separating whites from coloureds in the washing machine was a case in point in our house: I managed to get this unthinkable practice wiped out within the space of two spin cycles.
- ☆ **Compromise.** If you are both really set in your ways it can be very difficult to come to any kind of agreement and the only way forward is compromise. Do things his way one weekend and your way the next. Alternate festive traditions every year.

Let him have the final say in naming one child, and you the next. And so on. What you may find is that, very slowly, you let go of some of your habits, which you thought you couldn't live without, as you find that you actually can.

- ☆ **Keep it friendly.** The clash of two families coming together can be, if not bloody, then certainly quite messy. Somebody is bound to get hurt if you let things get too personal and critical. Be sensitive; remember that you are two people coming together from different backgrounds, philosophies and ways of hanging the washing – and something's gotta give. You can't expect your egos to remain bruise-free but you can avoid any major injuries to your relationship by joining ranks and staying on good terms. Maybe your habit of leaving the cucumber end uncovered could be one you leave behind . . .?
- ☆ **Stick to your guns.** There is more about this in the Guest Bedroom (see page 316), where we meet the in-laws and your Mum and Dad, but it's worth noting here that the two of you should never, ever do things in your new family because of pressure from your respective parents. Listen to them, consider their advice, but do what the two of you feel is right *for you*. It may hurt them, offend them or just baffle them, but it's *your* life, and you do with it what you like. Home education it is, then . . .

House Structure: Establishing the family hierarchy

Once upon a slightly more miserable and unfair time, families had a very clear hierarchical structure: men up in the penthouse, women in the middle (usually the kitchen) and kids either up a chimney or in the gutter. There were some half-landings reserved for elders, whether male or female, but apart from that it was very simple: everyone knew their place and it worked.

'Yes,' you say, 'but unless you fell into the "elder" or "man" camps, it was also shite.' Indeed it was, and that's why most of us are glad that the structure of most families today is less 'four-storey townhouse', and more 'one up, one down'. Parents still hold most of the authority upstairs, while the kids play downstairs, and family

meetings are regularly held on the landing for everyone to have their say. So far, so much more democratic.

What is slightly problematic, I think, is that some families have taken this improvement a step too far and have adopted a bungalow layout with everyone on a level with everyone else. There is no hierarchy, no authority and no control. In the same way that bungalows are unnatural (where are the stairs, woman, the *stairs*??), confusing and unattractive, so Bungalow Families are built on shaky ground, and should be denied planning permission.

Don't get me wrong – I'm all for equality, human rights, democracy and Saturday sweets. Of course children have the right to have their say in family matters as much as any adults do. The problem lies in allowing everyone to have their way, which obliterates any sense of authority or control, leading to Family Anarchy. The success of the TV series *Supernanny* was dependent on this collapse in hierarchy: family after family where the kids run riot, the parents have no control over them whatsoever, and they resort to violence, abuse and much head-shaking. *Where did we go wrong? Why have we been lumped with a child from Hell?* I wonder . . .

When you start to build your family, you both have to agree on what structure it will have: either vertical, where you guys basically make all the decisions, have the final say and can withhold pocket money if necessary; or horizontal, where you and your little darlings are on an equal level and all family decisions are made jointly. Here are some things to bear in mind if you are struggling between Dictatorship and Anarchy:

☆ **Social responsibility.** The way you bring your kids up will greatly influence how they behave outside the home. Some people don't seem to mind if their kids are unruly, rude, arrogant and uncontrollable and live quite happily in their bungalows. If you feel it might be better to instil some sense of respect, authority and having to do as one is told occasionally, then perhaps you'll need to take more control by adding a second floor. 'I know you want crisps, darling, but I'm your mother and I say "no" because you had them yesterday. End of discussion!'

- ☆ **Welcome to the Real World.** If kids never hear the words, 'Well, sometimes life sucks, so you're going to have to do as I say this time, I'm afraid', then they are in for a rude shock one day when they come across a teacher, policeman or employer. Best to get this Life Lesson learned early, and teach them that we all have to do as we're told sometimes, however unfair, unjust or inconvenient it may be.
- ☆ **Having their say**. Children who feel they have no sense of power or control over their lives at all can become very aggressive or depressed and may even grow into evil dictators who threaten to take over the world. It's vital that kids are allowed to have their say on matters that affect them. It's important to listen, but not necessary to agree: so long as you explain why then they get a sense of having had a good shot at it. Anyway, they know when they are well wide of the mark – they're not stupid!
- ☆ **Family meetings.** This might seem a bit 'organised' but I know families who have weekly gatherings to go through who's not happy about what, how to improve the situation and whose turn it is to clean out the hamster cage. Quite a few disagreements are resolved this way, without anyone feeling downtrodden. This is Bungalow living in a sensible way: there is still some authority because Mum and Dad have to agree to what is being proposed, but everyone has an open mic every week to speak out.
- ☆ **Authority works.** If you decide to go for something a little more high-rise and authoritative, don't feel you're a cold-hearted relic of the Victorian age: many families are now realising that establishing a clear hierarchy within a family works very well, doesn't lead to screwed-up kids and makes life a lot more pleasant both within the home and outside it. If you lay down simple rules from day one and follow them, you should avoid ever living with tearaway tots.

Nobody wants to see children being silenced or bossed about by their parents, but there is something positive to be said for children understanding that their parents are superior to them and for there

to be mutual respect and parental control. This isn't child abuse; it's sensible family management.

Once you have got over the initial nerves, planning permission and design of your Family Home, you can get on with the fun job of building the thing and living in it. As with all construction, things will go wrong – you'll go over budget, there will be delays and you'll end up with something not quite as you drew up in the plans, but which you'll come to love just as much anyway.

And so, my brave companions, let us take our key in trembling hand and open the front door.

(Bugger, I dropped it. Hold on a sec . . . aha: here we are! In you come . . .)

PART TWO

The Front Porch



The F Word: Becoming a family

Welcome, welcome! Come in off the noisy, dirty street and let me take your coat. This, my friend, is where we begin our tour of the chaotic, thriving, occasionally hellish but more often colourful and very jolly place called the Family Home. Please don't mind the mess – this is a *real* family home, not an interiors feature, and I have quite deliberately left it in its natural, somewhat cluttered, finger-marked state so that you can get a sense of what really goes on in here.

If you have any doubts about whether the family *thing* is for you, then stride forth with me into the madness and mayhem and let me try to convince you that family life isn't quite as unattractive or unmanageable as it may occasionally appear.

If you've already been raising your own family for years and have come to terms with the fact that you are no longer free to fly off to Mexico on a whim, are somehow expected to have all the answers to Life's Big Questions, and will never bathe in peace again, then you can skip straight through to the Entrance Hall and take a seat for a while. Feel free to nose around while you wait – nothing is behind closed doors in this house. Just mind the loose

cable by the door. I've been meaning to fix it for months, but you know how it is . . .

For everyone else, let's pause here in the Front Porch for a moment, and consider what a shock it can be to become A Family.

What constitutes a 'family' differs between cultures, but where I, and probably you, live it means a group of people connected either by marriage or by birth. Yes, the lady next door may be very lovely, and by way of thanks for looking after your kids on a regular basis be awarded 'Honorary Auntie' status, but she's not, strictly speaking, Family. Kind neighbours aside, the reach of the branches of a family tree is almost limitless – indeed, I've read somewhere very clever and reasonably trustworthy that we are all related to one another somehow, if you look back far enough, which presumably means we are all also incestuous and inbred. Great.

For the purposes of this book a 'family' consists of you, your partner and all of your respective parents, siblings and children. Great Aunts are allowed in too, because they are usually very sweet and doddery and need as much family as they can get, as do any grandparents you still have. But that's about it. All the cousins, second cousins, nieces, nephews, godparents, Almost Uncles, and so on, are excess baggage as far as we are concerned. They are all very much a part of the family, of course, and dutifully turn up for Christmas or if there's a big family party going on with lashings of free booze, but to deal with the ins and outs of all of them here would be to cause this book to break your coffee table with its enormous weight.

Sticking with the tree analogy for a moment – it kind of works if you try hard enough – then just as big trees make little trees, so families go on to create new families. The idea of breaking free and starting your own New Family can be very daunting and take years to get used to, so don't worry if you sometimes feel you've taken a leap too far from the trunk and want back in: it's normal. It's been ten years since I started my own New Family and I still feel utterly

unqualified sometimes and expect somebody to knock on the door at any moment to take me 'home' again.

Here's how it happens: you spend the first major part of your life dangling happily somewhere towards the topmost branches of your family tree, waving in the breeze, getting a little older and hopefully wiser with the passing seasons and trying not to fall off due to excess cider drinking. Then, one wonderful, sunny day you rub against the leaves of a nearby tree, and – whoosh! The course of your life changes forever: you fall hopelessly in lust with a particularly handsome, sexy, clever piece of foliage and decide to spend the rest of your days with him, all going well and assuming no pert, tempting little variegated or evergreen ones get in the way and wreck everything. And so, you jump! Into the exciting world of cohabitation you go.

Things go pretty well for a while – lust turns to love, you blow along with the wind, travel together, work your way up the career ladder a bit and rent a tiny flat that almost puts you on the breadline but leaves just enough spare cash for Ikea tea-lights and the occasional curry. And then, just when you thought things were ticking along very nicely, thank you, you arrive at an unforeseen crossroads, and find yourselves having to decide where to go next without so much as a map or a compass.

To Have, or Have Not?

For most couples there comes a time, after they have investigated and familiarised themselves with every nook and cranny, fiddled with all the knobs and dials and got to level twenty, when they ask themselves, or each other, if they are very brave: 'Where now, Captain?' Should they take a left turn into Spousedom, or run for the hills and shack up with the Next Bloke to Come Along?

Well, it's a hard decision, and one which can become so agonising that it splits strong couples apart, because one or the other of them isn't brave enough to take the plunge. I am a great believer in the personal benefits and social importance of marriage and I hang around reasonably happily married people most of the time. Over

much wine and cheesy nibbles we gathered together the following bits of advice for anyone not sure of which way to go:

- ☆ **Don't wait for the Perfect Man and the Perfect Moment.** If you do, you will be waiting forever. No man is one hundred per cent perfect, and neither are you, so work out if you can live with his faults and love him despite any mistakes he may make on the way. Of course things may change, but you have to go on what you see before you now.
- ☆ **Is he your best friend?** People always say you should marry your best friend, and they are right. Don't marry the most beautiful, rich or sexy man: marry the guy you can't live without – whom you trust and who makes you laugh, feel completely at peace with yourself and who you would always choose to be with in a crisis.
- ☆ **Are you, as a couple, greater than the sum of your parts?** If you always become a stronger, nicer and happier person when you are with this guy, then you could be onto a good thing.
- ☆ **Don't focus on potential failure.** Yes, lots of marriages fall apart, but to approach yours with a 'how long will it last' attitude is to pave the way for failure. This is why prenups are such a distasteful idea. Decide to make it work 'come what may' and you stand a much better chance. (If you are the proud owner of a shitload of cash, then prenups are possibly worth considering, but as you are probably not quite in the £200 million bracket let's push on . . .)
- ☆ **Are you equals?** A marriage requires absolute equality and respect for it to be a happy one. This doesn't mean having the same level of job, doing equal amounts of childcare and housework or being as good at something as your partner is, but that neither one of you feels or acts superior or more important than the other.
- ☆ **Do some research.** It's best not to jump into something as big as marriage without checking a few things out first, as it's a little late once the ink has dried. Using your expert female intuition, and some cunning questioning, see if you can find out:

1. **What he expects of a wife.** Someone to be there when he gets home, with a smile, a four-course dinner, and a gin and tonic for Monsieur? Or has he grasped the concept that women might like to have, like, you know, a job or something as well as hoovering and plumping up the cushions?
2. **When, or if, he imagines you will have kids.** If you are thinking of 'some time in your thirties, once your career has reached a certain level', but he had something more along the 'as soon as we've consummated our marriage' in mind, then there will be big trouble ahead.

☆ **Is there complete trust and respect?** If there is, then you can both criticise and laugh at yourselves, and at each other, without getting upset. Yes, even jokes about your bum being huge should be well within limits.

☆ **Very Important Questions:** Will he take the bins out without moaning about it? Can you live with his inability to put wet towels in the laundry basket? Will he look after the kids when you need some extra time to work or to have a break, without feeling emasculated or hard done by? Does he think your work is an unnecessary distraction from your more important roles of cooking, cleaning and making yourself look *real pretty*? Will you wash the bath after him? Will he after you? And so on. If you don't ask yourself the questions, and get answers you are happy with, you are taking a leap into the unknown and the fall is usually rather messy, and expensive.

The 'kids' issue is *massive*, by the way, and not even talking about when or whether you might have children before deciding to marry someone is a bit like chopping your left arm off before you've thought whether you might like to be a concert pianist or not. You don't need to scare him off with persistent baby talk or spending Saturday afternoons in Baby Gap, but if you can't even raise the subject then what does that say about your relationship?

Ah, it's hard to find the Right Man, but, contrary to what you may have heard, not all men are bastards. Some are absolutely bloody fantastic, and do believe in equal rights, sharing the remote

control and opening the window after they've made a bit of a smell. Seek, and ye shall find him.

Popping the question: On your knees, ladies!

Once you've decided to take the road towards Married Life then somebody is going to have to pop the question.

But who, and how? In a moment of 'anything men can do I can do better' madness, fuelled by a growing fear of losing the man I wanted to grow old with and a large streak of impatience, I decided to don some Woman-Trousers and ask him to marry me.

It was a terrifying experience, and I sometimes wonder how I managed it without forgetting what it was I wanted to say, backing out in favour of chewing my right leg off or just throwing up right in front of him through nerves. (Never a good move, that.) But, hideous and frightening as it may be, popping the question is actually no more than just that: asking a question. Why, oh *why*, do so many relationships have to be relegated to the 'It's, like, *totally over*' pile because a woman waits for her man to ask?

We have mouths, don't we? And brains? And guts? SO ASK!! Seriously, if you love him to bits and want to marry the guy then just ask him. He can always say no, but if you take courage from the tips below you should avoid having to tear your hair out or go undercover for a year:

- ☆ **Don't over-rehearse.** 'Will you marry me' is hard enough to say without laughing or crying, but too much practice can give a genuine request more of a daytime soap opera feel to it, and he'll either laugh or cry, so that's both of you in a state. Seize the moment, and go for it.
- ☆ **Say it slowly.** Nervous words are always likely to come out in a bit of a rush, and sound more like 'William Harry, me?' or 'Will your marrow mean?' Neither is likely to get the response you are after.
- ☆ **If he says 'No'** you have to find a dignified way of leaving the room which makes it look as though you are perfectly happy

with the outcome, and were expecting it anyway – a kind of elegant 'Am I bovvered?' This is one good reason not to propose on a nine-hour flight. If you can also leave an air of 'You are a complete shit and have just screwed up the rest of my life', then so much the better. Then you can cry for a month and put on two stone due to excessive comfort-eating.

With all of this reassurance under your belt and your journey into Family Life begun, it's time to enter the Family Home itself. No more hanging out in the draughty front porch – we're ready to get into that entrance hall, muddy the carpet and have a good look around. You might not like all that you see, but there's a stiff drink at the end for those who survive the trip. Onward!