

Parents leave nitty-gritty to the pros

Georgie Keate

Nannies have long been vital members of many harassed working parents' households. Now an army of specialists to take care of every element of child rearing is falling in behind them.

Mothers and fathers are increasingly outsourcing the upbringing of their children. They can employ a professional toilet trainer, someone to teach their child to ride a bicycle and another expert to remove hair lice.

An advertisement was posted this week on the widely used website childcare.co.uk by a 36-year-old mother in Surrey looking for a "professional toilet trainer" for her three-year-old daughter. It provoked mixed reactions.

The mother claimed that she and her husband worked full time in "demanding jobs". She added: "We have previously tried to train her but unfortunately due to our busy careers we've realised we simply do not have the time to do so."

"We are very conscious that our daughter should be using a toilet by now, and with the in-laws coming over for Christmas, I am desperate to get her fully using the toilet by December 23."

Many accused her of neglectful parenting. Nilufer Atik, the health and fitness coach, said that the advert was "disgusting".

Amanda Jenner, the founder of Potty Training Academy, disagreed. She said that women should not be blamed for having busy careers.

"There has been a lot of reaction to this and most of the time, people will blame it on bad parenting," she said. "But the parents are not to blame. Society has changed and there are not so many stay-at-home mums who can do this all the time. They are working and have little time."

Her venture is one of scores of similar companies across the country that charge parents £500 a day to teach their children to move on from nappies.

Ms Jenner has warned of a "potty training crisis" with children arriving at primary school unable to use the lavatory alone.

Teacher surveys suggest that 70 per cent of primary schools are reporting an increase of children aged four and five begin-



The Lice Assassins get to work. Amanda Jenner, below, says women should not be blamed for having hectic careers

ning their first day in nappies. A report from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers found that the average age for a toilet-trained child was now three and a half, up from 15 months 50 years ago.

Official figures show that 75 per cent of married or cohabiting women with dependent children go to work, while 69 per cent of single parents of both sexes have jobs.

Ms Jenner said that these time-pressed parents had a long list of recurring problems. Their child-

Case study

Amy Alderson, 33, is an operations director at Tops Day Nursery in Bournemouth (Georgie Keate writes). She works a 35-hour week and her husband, a building material technician, works 45 hours.

She has just called Potty Training Academy in a "cry for help" after struggling to train her son, Sebastian, two.

"I just did not know

what to do," she said. "You feel like such a failure and there is so much pressure to get your child out of nappies. I thought I was totally equipped but the last four months have been such a challenge."

"Recently I had to put him back in nappies, which I cried over. I didn't do it because I am lazy or can't be bothered to train him, he was clearly not ready. I will have to try again in the new year." She

said that working full time meant that she could not be at home to take her son to the lavatory once an hour. "At the weekends when I am at home, it takes ten minutes every hour to persuade him to use the toilet," she said.

"Then there are accidents in between and all the extra bathing and clothes cleaning that entails. "I am so worried about the accidents that I have stopped taking him places."

Texting spells end of the apostrophe

Jack Malvern

The enduring conflict between grammarians and greengrocers over the correct use of apostrophes has turned in favour of the vegetable sellers.

A leading linguistics researcher believes that misuse, especially in electronic communications, is so prevalent that the mark may soon become redundant. Nenagh Kemp, of the University of Tasmania, found that even university students were struggling to grasp the correct way of using apostrophes.

This decline is in spite of the efforts of The Apostrophe Protection Society, which fights for the mark from its powerhouse in Lincolnshire, and The Apostrophiser, a self-styled "grammar vigilante" who has erased or introduced apostrophes on shop signs in Bristol.

Strictly speaking, apostrophes are a

matter of punctuation rather than grammar. Professor Kemp's research found that literate undergraduates based in Hobart inserted apostrophes in plural words 13 per cent of the time. They were significantly worse at using apostrophes correctly with singular possessive words, such as "the cup's handle", which they got wrong 47 per cent of the time. For plural possessives, such as "all the cups' handles", they got it wrong 72 per cent of the time.

She told *The Times* that although there had been studies of poor apostrophe use by students from as early as 1922 the prevalence of electronic communication had accelerated the change. "When much of people's reading and writing is electronic, it's no longer seen as important to write grammatically correctly, as long as the message gets across," she said. "One of the

biggest 'victims' of this trend is the apostrophe."

A study she published with Clare Wood and Sam Waldron of Coventry University found that poor punctuation in text messages was predicted by lower scores in grammar tests, but there was another explanation. "People who omit grammatical patterns from their text messages don't necessarily not know them," she said. "They choose not to use them for the sake of efficiency."

Devotees of the apostrophe who seek to correct erroneous shop signs should not give up, Professor Kemp suggested. "When people don't see apostrophes used correctly in the print environment, there's less incentive for them to try to get them right."

The Apostrophiser's correction of signs such as "Amys Nail's" may prove to be the punctuation mark's salvation.

Emojis go follically correct with addition of redheads

Mark Bridge Technology Correspondent

Emojis have already been updated to better represent religious and ethnic minorities and the gender-neutral. Now redheads are set to be recognised.

Faces with ginger hair feature alongside bald and grey-haired people on a shortlist of 82 emojis for 2018 from the Unicode consortium that decides which symbols are introduced.

The tech companies behind Unicode — including Apple, Google and Microsoft — have worked to improve the "inclusivity" of emojis. They added different races in 2015 and this year introduced gen-

der-neutral faces, a breastfeeding woman and a woman in a hijab. Yet despite repeated requests and a petition signed by 22,000 people, redheads, who constitute 1 to 2 per cent of the global population, are yet to be represented.

Other planned emojis should appeal to mathematicians and scientists, including an abacus, petri dish, DNA strand, microbe, and test tube. There's also a proposed "woozy face" emoji, described as "dizzy, drunk, intoxicated, tipsy, uneven eyes, wavy mouth".

The final list of emojis will be released early next year and they will arrive on phones in the following months.

Parents can post specific requests on internet sites to find childminders or nannies who can teach set skills but companies that focus on certain aspects of parenting are proliferating. Popcycle in London will teach a child to ride for £40 a session. The company claims that watching your child ride a bike for the first time is a proud moment in any parent's life. But it goes on to suggest that the road to success is "often paved with difficulties, frustration and challenges".

The Hairforce, in Primrose Hill, north London, will do home visits to rid children of lice. Their promotions claim that the "Lice Assassin" will arrive in "her uniform or not, whatever you wish". They go on to promise: "She will turn up in a sleek, black, un-branded people carrier or private car and will unpack her equipment, and set up where directed in your home." Prices start from £32.

While childminders are rarely trained, there are now professionals who will carry out specific tasks, such as teaching youngsters to eat broccoli.

The charity Children's Food Trust provides trained childminders. Julia Deakin, of Doncaster, explained that getting children involved in cooking and guessing food names encouraged them to eat meals they would have rejected previously.

Parents can even hire a play date to give their child cultural and artistic influences. Role Models, in London, nurtures "character in children" by providing childminders talented in "at least one of music, arts and crafts, drama, sport or homework". They cost £16.50 an hour and will come on holidays.

Justine Roberts, the Mumsnet founder, said: "Having small children is joyful but combing for nits is not. Having someone take toilet training off your hands — literally — is, frankly, the stuff of dreams."

"Mumsnet users tend to think that if parents have the money and are happy to spend it on professionals, it's a win-win. After all, lots of parents pay people to teach their children how to play football, how to swim or how to cook sausages and beans over a campfire.

"Parents in paid work don't get an awful lot of unpressured downtime to spend with their kids, so why not prioritise the really important stuff, like reading, chatting and larking about?"

