

THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE

After 10 years of paying for childcare, TESS STIMSON finally came to realise that hiring a nanny was the worst mistake she had ever made

Shortly before my son turned three I told my nanny I wanted to pick him up from nursery myself. It was the first time I'd ever volunteered to make the dreaded school run, so the look of astonishment on her face was understandable, but I had an ulterior motive.

I'd looked forward to my first proper



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Mother's Day practically since the moment I found out I was pregnant. I wanted to be there as my son ran out of school with a card bigger than he was.

I'd seen the hand-print tea towels and glitter-and-glue cards my friends' children had brought home, displayed in pride of place in their kitchens as if they were Picassos.

Now I could finally look forward to my own work of art. As the school doors opened, I readied myself excitedly.

'Look what I made for nanny!' my son exclaimed, waving a huge blue and green card covered with red paper hearts. 'It's for Mother's Day!'

They say the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. She also wrecks your family, ruins your children and can destroy your marriage. You choke down coffee and tear off to work to earn enough to kit her out in LK Bennetts and designer jeans. She catches falling leaves with your toddler in the park, and cosies up on the sofa to watch *Bambi*.

First baby steps? Nanny's the one holding out her arms to catch them. First word? Nanny hears it.

Many women fear their nanny will have an affair with their husband. It does happen, of course. But the real danger is that the person performing all the vital functions at the heart of the family becomes its fulcrum, around which everything turns, and that person should be you.

Career mothers often point out that they couldn't cope with their children full time, and would go mad

if they couldn't work. I'm sorry to be brutal: but why have them in the first place? Children aren't hobbies. They should be front and centre in your life, not an after-hours option.

Nor does the economic argument – that you need two incomes these days to keep a roof over your head – ring true. Often a mother's entire salary is eaten up paying the nanny. People who really

need two earners can't afford one – they use crèches or get grandma to babysit.

If you really want to, you can scale back on the luxuries, or downsize your car or home. Ask which your children would really prefer.

I employed four nannies over 10 years because the thought of giving myself over to my children was too terrifying. They were all pleasant, competent girls who cared for my three children with efficiency and affection. For a decade I split myself in two, short-changing my family and my career.

Then suddenly, when my sons were 10 and seven and my daughter two, my nanny quit without notice and eloped with her boyfriend. Thrown in the deep end, I was stunned to discover I could cope. In fact, I did more than just cope.

I connected with my children in a way I never had before. I was there to hear all their stories from school, to help with homework and play dress-up. We ate meals together, and pulled together as a family for the first time. Tired though I was, I called the nanny agency back and cancelled the interviews I'd arranged.

Four years later I realise hiring a nanny was the worst mistake of my life. Even now, I'm grappling with the bad habits my 14-year-old son picked up from a decade of girls who had no investment in making sure he turned out well; they simply wanted to get the job done.

My relationship with my six-year-old daughter is a joy, and I deeply regret missing out on so much of those wonderful early years with my boys. My children are a thousand times better behaved now that they can't play the guilty-mother card.

Last September my daughter started school. Suddenly, I had six and a half hours to myself every day. I had my first massage in three years. The house was a haven of peace and quiet.

I really missed the children. ●