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Child-care issue that just leaves you scratching your head

February 19 2003

The head lice in a northern beaches preschool make Afghanistan look like a sterile environment. Cilla Cole battles her way through.

It was the president of the kindergarten parents' committee who discovered the lice in my children's hair. We were new and I was trying to make a good impression, but there was no sneaking my living nit nests past her. She had school-age children, so was quick to recognise the signs.

As she took me through the examination process - very quickly, as she was understandably keen to get me out of there - it became more and more embarrassing that I hadn't picked anything up myself, as even the hair (singular) of my six-month-old was crawling with them.

I have to admit I had noticed them all scratching but, since we live on the northern beaches, had put it down to "just" ticks. I had discounted nits, as I'd heard they only like clean hair.

All present began scratching their heads as the president outlined what I had to do. Basically, wash everything.

So home I went, via the chemist, to do just that. I washed all afternoon and into the night. During my washing frenzy, with a stroke of brilliance, I threw in the hot pink hat with the white sheets and so had to soak and wash everything again.

I even washed the children's car seat covers. It was evidently high time I did. Undemeath I found a living horror movie - a few hundred sultanas, a bucketload of sand, half a packet of chips, pink icing from a cup cake and \$2.80 in

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coins. Being the highly challenged housewife that I am, I felt a great sense of achievement in getting those seats clean. Until I tried to get the covers back on.

Folding up a beach tent in high winds now seems incredibly easy. After almost two hours of working myself into a total lather I managed to get everything back in place. Only when I tried to buckle the children in did I discover that I had put the wrong buckles on the wrong seats and nothing would do up.

Should I risk driving, albeit a short distance, without my precious vermin-infested darlings strapped in, or should I take the children out, the seats out, the covers off, the belts and buckles out, and try again? Either way, there was the danger of someone being seriously hurt.

"You'll be right," I said to my children. "We're not going far" - undermining, in one fell swoop, four years of nagging on the importance of being buckled in. But it couldn't be helped. We needed more lice shampoo.

Thankfully, we returned home safely and, having washed everything in sight, I then turned to wash every one. There were screams of sore eyes and pulled hair, and the bathroom smelt like a vet's waiting room, but we finally got everyone to bed, with luck, all deloused.

It was Valentine's Day, so my husband and I then sat down to a romantic dinner with lice mousse in our hair. Predictably, when I went to wash mine out all the hot water was gone, so, after a bracing cold shower, I collapsed into bed totally exhausted and smelling as though I was wearing a new flea collar.

I then remembered reading on the shampoo instructions that this whole process should be repeated every week for six weeks. Shaved heads were definitely looking like a good option.

A few days later my sister went to a talk by a woman who had been held hostage in Afghanistan. She reported the conditions were so bad in one prison that two of the women had head lice. Initially, my sympathy went out to her, feeling I could understand that only too well. But then I realised that she at least was out of prison; I had 23 years of preschool and school ahead of me.

Perhaps, as with most experiences that would have turned me green before I had children, nits will become just part of the routine. Dealing with a lice infestation may not even rate a mention during tuckshop duty. Like being covered in vomit on public transport or having unsightly stains down the front of my dress, I will barely register the inconvenience. Not least because, by then, the children will have grown out of car seats.

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words, with your contact details, to sbaldwin@smh.com.au. Submissions may be edited and published on the internet.

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