

home sweet home? not likely!

If you think being a parent is hard work, then try moving house with three young children. If you haven't yet had your nervous breakdown, I can thoroughly recommend it.

When we bought our current abode, we were childless, and our criteria for the perfect house was perhaps a little different. At that time, we were after posh sitting rooms with expensive carpets, large, tranquil bedrooms in which we could spend lazy Sundays dozing, reading newspapers in comfort, with the occasional bonk to pass the time.

Despite our modest requirements, it took us an inordinate amount of time to agree on a house last time round. I was after a sweet Tudor cottage with roses round the door, inglenook fireplaces and a thatched roof. He, quite unreasonably I thought, would not consider anything he couldn't stand upright in. We viewed over 60 houses before we compromised on a 1920s house with twentieth-century headroom.

Their father, meanwhile, is keen on something with a completely self-contained granny annexe – not, you understand, because he has a sudden desire for either granny to come and live with us. No, he fancies it for himself.

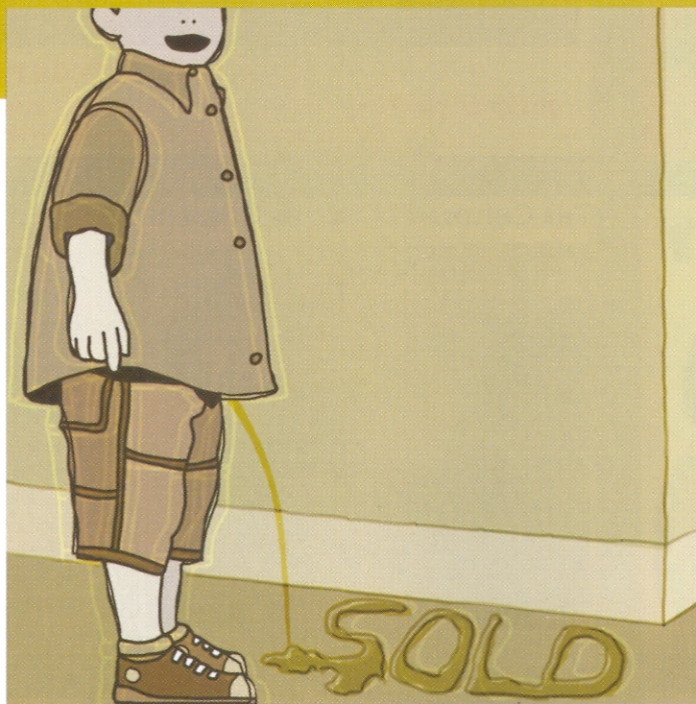
I am still looking for my dear little cottage where I can curl up on the chintzy couch in front of the inglenook while the male mem-

anonymous, had a bathroom with royal blue wallpaper and a liberal scattering of large yellow, green and red flowers. We lost one child en route and later discovered her sitting mesmerised, "watching the flowers dance". Relaxing? I think not.

Toilets are a great way of judging whether a house is acceptable. Whenever my youngest boy demands a wee in a house we're viewing, it probably means he likes it. I've come to the conclusion that he is marking out new territory, like a dog – is this a male thing, or is it just my family?

Still at least the children appear to be enthusiastic about the houses we visit – most of the time. Despite threats of torture should they make rude or embarrassing comments, the odd comment still slips through. "This house smells!" for example.

They also haven't grasped the concept that the contents of the house are not thrown in. Thus we had one child insisting we bought a particular house because of the garden furni-



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After such a mammoth effort, it has taken us ten years and three children before we would even consider doing it again. What we didn't realise was that now there are five people's tastes to consider.

The children want a garden with secret passages, ditches, streams and the like. My middle son in particular has bizarre thoughts about the ideal house. "I like that one because it's a rectangle," he told me about a particularly plain 1970s house with the sort of front façade which would quickly make me lose the will to live.

"I like the one with the round window" chimes in the youngest. They're both doing shapes in maths, and like to impress.

"What about a hexagonal one?" contributes the oldest one. Oh dear.

Members of the household live in the barn – it won't feel any different to them anyway. I have long since abandoned the idea of roses round the porch; I never get time to garden, and my boys treat flowers as a personal challenge, attacking them with sticks, feeding them to slugs and other despicable acts.

Bathrooms have become more important to me now. I am the kind of mother who spends as much time in them as possible, head submerged in a desperate attempt to cut out the noise. So I don't want an avocado suite with gold taps. I want to relax, not throw up, but the other members of the family, who view washing as a chore to get through as quickly as possible, think I am just incredibly fussy.

One house, which had better remain

ture, another fell in love with the vendor's cat, and my daughter fancied the house that had a playroom kitted out for three daughters – pastel pink and free from pet caterpillars and snails.

If we ever do manage to agree on a house, there will be trauma leaving our own house behind. Have you ever tried boxing up all the accoutrements of a young child? They are quite adamant that there is nothing they can do without for a week or so – apart from perhaps clothes, especially school uniforms. There is also absolutely nothing that can be thrown away. No, they may still need those toilet rolls, that broken rubber, the large robot they made in nursery out of cereal boxes and milk tops.

How can I do this to them? How can I do it to myself? Maybe in another ten years... ■