

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/4

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The Life and Times of a Male Childminder

MY CHILDMINDING CAREER LASTED JUST OVER THREE YEARS from July 2009 through to August 2012. My previous employment was as a Learning Support Assistant with children who had learning needs within a Primary School setting.

My wife and I in previous years, learnt the devastating truth that we will never be able to conceive children of our own. After several painstaking years of exhausting all possible options of having our own children the route of adoption became clear to us if we were ever to have our own family.

Throughout 2007 and 2008 we persevered with the laborious trials and tribulations that are involved with an adoption process. We supported each other through the terrifying panel meetings and we were ecstatic to be finally matched in 2008 with a two year old boy with severe Special Educational Needs.

My wife and I both had careers in education and employment involved in working with children. We were both in full-time jobs at the time we adopted our first son and so I had the standard two weeks parental leave and my wife had the following nine months leave to look after our new son. We made the joint decision in January 2009 it would make financial sense for myself to end my job in the Primary School at the end of the academic year in July and for my wife to go back to work in the September as she was on the higher wage.

As I still needed to earn a wage whilst looking after our son and with the background and experience I had of working in the Early Years it made practical sense to enrol as a self-employed childminder. I completed the introductory course in childminding during the evenings in the final two months of my work at the Primary School.

During the summer of 2009, although I was registered as a childminder, I was required to get all my policies and procedures up to date, ensure my house and garden was inspected and safe to accept children and all my risk assessments, planning, evaluations, observations and activities were ready for the influx of toddlers and babies.

As well as the wonderfully unique experience of enjoying a summer with my new family with outings to the beach, theme parks, swimming and of course soft play, I prepared my new employment with great gusto and plenty of advertising. I decided to give my new venture the name of 'Laugh and Learn Childminding' and designed posters, leaflets, car magnets and a whole host of stationary.

I researched in to how much I should charge and found that the local rate for a childminder was between £3.00 and £4.50 per hour. Although I was educated to degree level and had over twenty years experience in working with children and young people I humbly set my prices at £4.00 per hour per child and £3.50 per hour for a sibling.

I was to look after the children alongside caring for our son whilst my wife was at work Monday to Friday and we would have the weekends to

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enjoy our time together as a family. September eventually arrived after a busy and fun-filled summer holiday. After extensive advertising online and around the local area I was expecting immediately to start getting enquiries and showing parents around our house and garden and showing off all my carefully prepared plans and policies.

The first day of my exciting new self-employed occupation had finally arrived and I was on tender hooks, eager to show the world how I can survive in a severely female dominated role.

A visit to the park, lunch at home, an hours afternoon nap and soft play filled my son's day with laughter and happiness. My waking hours were filled with confusion and uncertainty of why my mobile phone hadn't rang or why my home voicemail was not beeping furiously full of expectant enquiries.

Day two in to this new era of my life resulted in another fun-packed adventure with my 3 year old albeit with a varied array of activities to the previous day. Again no contact was made to Laugh and Learn childminding from the childcare seeking world. The barren void of communication continued through for the first week.

On Monday morning, on the first day of week two as a male childminder, approximately at 9.15am, I received a call from a mother seeking childcare...

After I politely answered the phone, she asked to speak to the childminder of Laugh and Learn Childminding. The answer I received after responding that I was the childminder was as follows:

'uh... oh, ok... I... I was just enquiring... Thanks,'

I listened to the dead tone of the phone for several seconds before returning the device to its base.

Puzzled at the response, I thought what I could say next time to continue the call for longer than the few brief moments I shared with my first ever call for my childminding services.

I received four more calls in the following two weeks, with similar anxious replies. To prolong a phone call for more than the caller hearing a male voice before hanging up, I tried, when possible, for my wife to answer the phone.

The same response occurred however, when my wife, explaining that I was the childminder, the phone being passed to me and a rushed, garbled voice saying she only wanted to know prices or something similar before, again, hanging up on me.

This process continued for the next two weeks. Now a month had passed since Laugh and Learn Childminding was launched and not one child cared for, part from my Son, had occurred.

Until one day in the middle of October, I received a call from another father. He was in between jobs and as such was currently a full-time father for his daughter. He required childcare for his daughter whilst he was job hunting, attending interviews etc. We arranged a mutual convenient time for the tour around the house and garden to be taken by his

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daughter and himself. A take-home booklet of policies and procedures was given after, what appeared to be a successful session. I was told by the seemingly content father that he will ask his wife to ring me to arrange a time for her to meet me have a look around my house. A day later I received the call, we arranged a time for her visit and she, as her husband, left seemingly happy at the services that I could provide in caring for their two year old daughter. She did say, however, she was meeting two other childminders and would be in contact in the next few days.

The ringtone on my phone remained silent in relation to childminding, as did the landline for the following two days after the mother's visit. The third day brought her decision. I answered the phone, whilst I was having lunch with my son. I greeted her as I have been doing with all calls relating to my business as professionally as I thought I sounded. The response I received from her was as follows:

'Hi Philip, we have decided we would love you to be our daughters childminder.'

The call continued arranging when to meet to fill out the contracts, drop off and pick up times, dietary requirements, etc.

My confused son was keen to return to his lunch after receiving a huge cuddle from his beaming dad. I rang my wife with the news I had eventually acquired my first family to childmind for. As a family, we celebrate achievement, regardless of how big or small and enjoyed an Indian take-away that evening.

Contracts were agreed and signed. The first day was a great success and from then on was an absolute delight for my son and myself looking after the toddler. The abrupt phone calls continued from the paranoid Mothers unaware of the irony that another male carer had put his faith in me to look after his daughter.

I continued to care for the young girl alongside my son up to and through the Christmas holidays without being able to add to my ratios.

As fate would have it, in early January 2010, I received a phone call from another father looking for childminding. Again, he arrived with his daughter, met my son and myself and had the tour around the house and garden. After a successful visit from his partner, my second minded child joined the Laugh and Learn roster.

The requirements from both sets of parents were such that my care for both girls did not intertwine on corresponding days.

Now my business was beginning to take momentum and I was a male childminder caring for two young girls, I naïvely thought the sexist, stereotyped filled phone calls from presumptuous narrow-minded mothers would decline. My hopes to be accepted as an equal in this harsh, cynical female world were soon dashed as my capacity to childmind were limited to the two girls I cared for. The enquiries continued to be brief and limited to excuses to end the call from the intolerant female voice on echoing disapproval from my receiver.

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Throughout my three years and one month as a childminder I did also care for two brothers on occasion. The times I looked after the boys amounted to around two days a month over a period of four months.

My knowledge of other male childminders equated to those who ran their business together with their wives or female partner, I have yet to meet another male childminder who works independently, but I am sure they are out there... somewhere...

I enjoyed my time as a childminder immensely and built up great professional relationships with the children in my care and their families, there is, however, an overwhelming lack of male carers within the early years in the United Kingdom. It saddens me to report, until an adequate minimum wage is introduced and an equality for males to be accepted as the main carer for young children, this trend is, unfortunately, going to continue.