

# SURVIVAL GUIDE TO MOTHERHOOD

Words by **Alana Kirk-Gillham**

Ok, here are some simple questions. If you've never had a baby, you can be excused for wondering why I'm asking them. If you are a mother, then you'll know there are no simple answers and these are the questions that torment us on a daily basis. Are they deep and meaningful? No. Will they contribute to the great philosophical debates of our time? Probably not. But as a parent, you'll be asking them every day, and if you are anything like me, ranting whenever you get the chance.

If you are a mother with at least one baby (and the answers get harder with each additional child!), how do you...

Pee in public?  
Shoe shop?  
Get your legs waxed?  
Buy petrol?  
Go food shopping?

These might seem like mundane tasks that most of us can do with our eyes shut. But throw a toddler into the mix and they become near impossible feats. Let's take a few examples. I have a newborn baby and a toddler under two, both still in nappies. Now, throw in a double buggy and the inevitable plethora of bags (handbag, change bag, et al) and I'm like an elephant tramping through the forest destroying everything around me. I should come with flashing orange lights and a siren. Shopping for shoes (in crammed stores, where they come with a price tag under €300) is just not possible. Shopping in any high-street store, where the gap between clothes stands seems designed to be exactly two inches narrower than my pram, is an obstacle course. Having had my fill of back

peddling to extract clothes dragged into my pram wheels, reversing out of shops because I can't get to the back where the really nice tops are and manoeuvring a heavy pram, two children and 14 bags up a flight of steps because there is no lift in the shop, I now buy my clothes on-line – you get to shop when the kids have gone to bed, drink a cuppa while perusing the latest trends and have them delivered straight to your door. I've been forced to become a Boden Babe.

Now excuse me while I talk toilets. No matter how many times I do the maths, a buggy just doesn't fit into a public loo cubicle, and many baby changes now don't have loos in them, so I have been forced on several occasions to pee in public...literally. I've had to jam the pram against my cubicle door so the babes are in sight while using the facility with the door open for all and sundry to watch. I know people say you leave your dignity at the hospital door when you have a baby, but you'd think you might be able to keep it intact on a shopping trip! I'm going to be sexist here, but shops, loos and shopping centres must have been designed by men. Of course, they don't actually mind peeing in public, but for goodness sake, can someone not think to make cubicles a bit wider? I no longer choose shopping venues for their actual retail opportunities, but purely for their toilet facilities. Ask me about any shopping centre or high street in a hundred mile radius and I can give you a loo rating. Maybe we should invent a standard symbol for shopping centres – if you have a child you can pee in this store!

And as for those essentials that we women need to carry out to look semi-human? As if it isn't bad enough that we have to carry excess baby fat, look ten years older because





of sleep deprivation, and forget some days to even brush our hair, it's also impossible to even get our legs waxed. There is such a niche market for a beauty salon with crèche facilities! There is a fortune to be made for someone with two ounces of sense.

And petrol. Are we really supposed to put petrol in our cars and then take a toddler and baby out of their car seats, into the shop, pay, pull said toddler off the sweet counter, ignore subsequent tantrum, and then strap them all back in again?! I'm sure I'm not the only parent who would drive miles for the luxury of a pump attendant.

One major high-street retailer gives the impression of being family friendly and all for helping mums. They provide highchairs and baby change facilities, and flasks of hot water to heat baby's bottles. But they won't heat baby's food, so if I go out for the day, I can feed my baby, but not my toddler, and the tables are so tightly squeezed together, you can't get your pram at the table. Everytime I go into town now I have a mental map of where to pee, where to change nappies, where I can eat and feed my kids, and where I can get into and through the shop with minimal destruction.

Now I'll admit, we women are pretty adept at the daily Great One-Handed Assault Courses – holding a baby while achieving all manner of domestic chores, but, really, do they have to make it so difficult? In 21st century Ireland, why is it so hard to be a parent?!

Looking after kids is difficult enough without the added stresses of bad planning. But I guess if we all start voting with our feet, these places may realise that they have a captive – and desperate – market of parents who need help! There are a few far-sighted places that know how to make our lives just that bit easier. The new Dublin shopping centre at Dundrum is an example – all the kids shops are together, there is a baby changing facility on every floor, large open food areas and even a crèche! A major supermarket also takes the stress out of food shopping by allowing you to zap barcodes and pack your food into shopping bags as you put them into the trolley, saving you that awful assault at the end of the shop of taking everything out and then packing it all away again. I wouldn't contemplate shopping anywhere else. Maybe if the hands that rock the cradles start rocking the boat a little, we'll get the facilities we need – and deserve! **MM**