

'I'm a manny about the house'

Mannies, or male nannies, are the hottest new trend. Britney Spears and Gwyneth Paltrow have them, and Victoria Beckham is reportedly thinking of hiring one. But, says Lee France, 25, from London, there's more to it than pushing designer prams



Lee says his clean-living lifestyle makes him the perfect role model

If someone had told me I was going to end up working as a male nanny in my 20s, I'd never have believed them. But after a stint in a boring hotel job aged 18, I decided I wanted to work with people in a more direct way. That's when I got a job helping out with singing and art classes at a nearby nursery. I met lots of parents during my time there and would often overhear them talking about how hard it was to find the right nanny for their kids. So one day I asked one of the mums if she'd consider hiring a male nanny. "Yes, definitely," she told me. "If he was the right person for the job."

After gaining another year's experience of running an after-school club for four- and five-year-olds, I decided to give full-time nannying a go. So I joined up with an agency called Tinies who said they were keen to take me on.

At first it was a bit disheartening. I'd go for interviews and do trials with families and, even though I'd get on really well with the mum and kids, the dad would often seem threatened by me and say he'd prefer a female nanny.

It's just prejudice – but it's ridiculous. There's absolutely no reason why I wouldn't be able to look after children just as well as a woman. I think men actually make better nannies, as they're more willing to muck in and get their hands dirty.

Luckily lots of families have taken me on since then, especially those with boys, and I think the thing that always attracts them to me is the fact I'm a good role model. I'm very clean living – I don't smoke or go out and get drunk, I'm really into healthy eating and I'm fun and approachable. More like a big brother than a teacher.

One of the main concerns parents have is how I'll feel about doing so-called "women's work". The first time I met one of the families that

I now work for, the mum turned round to me and said, "How would you feel if I asked you to bake a cake?"

"I'm happy to rustle up a chocolate Victoria sponge if I have to," I laughed. "How hard is it to follow a recipe?"

Apart from baking and cooking up healthy meals for the kids, I also tidy as I go, although I'm not a cleaner and I always make that clear. It's never been an issue, though, as most of the families I work for have cleaners and housekeepers working for them as well.

Most couples assume I'll be good at the more "male" aspects of childcare, like taking the kids out to play in the park and keeping them in line. And, to be honest, I've never had a problem with discipline. I think it's because I can

relate to the children on their level. I've also been asked to do the odd bit of DIY and gardening when there's been nothing else to do. I don't have any airs and graces, and I'm not overly sensitive about the way things are done – unlike some female nannies. Some families have said that women can be fussy when it comes to food, whereas I'll eat whatever's put in front of me. And if my employer wants me to make a lasagne in a particular way, I'm happy to do it.

The only downside to working as a male nanny is it can be hard to meet women – I'm still single. Most of the mums I come into contact with have a husband lurking in the background! But it can be a good pulling tactic. I'm happy to talk

about my job with women when I'm out and they're often really interested in it. My mates think it's cool that I get to spend my days ferrying kids to school, playing in the park and going shopping. I think they're actually quite envious of the variety and the perks, like spending Christmas with a family in New York or getting paid to sip champagne all day as an extra pair of hands at a party. Of course, things don't always go as planned. I've burned dinners before, and once I was so busy playing with a toddler in the park that I didn't notice the designer pushchair roll down the

hill behind me and crash into the lake. The toddler thought it was hilarious – and thankfully no one was hurt. I'm very proud of what I do. Watching children grow and learn and being part of that process is very rewarding. But one thing I've learned from doing this job is that I definitely don't want kids. It's for selfish reasons really. Being a parent is a 24-hour job – after four years of nannying I know better than anyone. I love the fact that I get to enjoy them in the day without the hassle of 5am wake-up calls and reluctant bedtimes. You have to give yourself up for your kids 100 per cent and I just can't imagine doing that. I'm happy living my life without my own children – but when it comes to other people's kids, the enjoyment is endless.

As told to: Yvonne Gawan. Pictures: Final Pix/Reina Celestis. AFF/Geoffrey/AD/Elia O'Brien.



CELEBS WITH MANNIES...

● Britney Spears hired Perry Taylor, a bodyguard, to look after her two children after her split from Kevin Federline in 2006.

● Madonna hired a live-in manny in 2007 to look after adopted son David. He was instructed

never to bring back a girlfriend to the house.

● In 2006 Gwyneth Paltrow took on a manny for kids Apple and Moses.

● Liz Hurley is said to prefer male carers and hired one for her son Damian in 2007, reportedly to provide a masculine role model.



'I'm happy to rustle up a Victoria sponge as well as muck in and get my hands dirty'

A MANNY'S WORK IS NEVER DONE...

- Give baby Jane breakfast ✓
- Take Tommy to school ✓
- Pick up shopping ✓
- Put Jane down for nap ✓
- Bake cake ✓
- Give Jane her lunch ✓
- Tidy playroom ✓
- Pick up Tommy ✓
- Football in the park ✓
- Make dinner ✓