

## **An Insect's guide to parenting.**

A little over a year ago the incredible genius of insects was brought home to me in a slightly unusual way. It was 2.58 am, I was in the maternity ward of Winchester hospital, tightly holding my partners hand and doing my best to think of the most comforting words to try and sooth this seemingly agonising experience. As we reached the climatic moment and our new baby drew his first breath I had nothing but an overwhelming sense of joy, the most joyous joy I could ever have imagined. The midwife handed me our new baby, I did not hesitate I was so overcome with emotion... In my arms was an incredibly tiny quivering little person, he stared up at me and I back at him. Wallowing in jubilation, I suddenly had a terrifying realisation... I have no idea what to do. I was mildly reassured to be told that many first time parents feel this way, some turn to family for guidance, some to books. I however had a different instinct, insects.

I took to the internet for counsel. I soon discovered the small fluffy bee fly of the dipteran genus *Bombylius*. The female first camouflages her eggs in dust or sand, she hunts out the burrow of an unsuspecting solitary bee, hovers above the opening and flicks her eggs into the burrow. These eggs will be protected by the unwitting bee before hatching and massacring her own brood. Kind of like dropping your kids off with a nanny but she is unaware and when the baby wakes up it kills their entire family. Perhaps not the best example of good parenting, I continued looking.

Next I discovered the hymenopterans of the family Vespidae. The social wasps. These parents rear hundreds of offspring, they must have some good ideas. For vespids the queen dominates, maintaining order through continuous aggressive interactions. Similar to giving someone a slap around the back of the head just to remind them you are still in charge. I started to doubt this as a suitable method for me, looking down at my son the thought of having to be continually aggressive to such an innocent looking being did not sit so well with my conscious. However, I continued to read, maybe it gets better... Over time a queens dominance begins to wain, another fertile female will begin to test the queens grip on power often breaking out into a brawl. In these instances it is not uncommon for the daughter to kill her mother and snatch the crown, ushering in a new era of slightly more youthful brutality... No, I had read enough. I was not to be a vespid parent.

Undeterred I trawled on, at first sight the dung beetle *Onthophagus taurus* seemed like I was onto something, a caring couple who build an underground home for their offspring, stocking it with food... keeping my child underground with only a ball of faeces to eat...

perhaps not. Nearing despair, I learned of the aquatic hemipteran *Kirkaldyia deyrolli*. The giant water bug. I was in territory with which I could relate. The female attaches eggs to surface vegetation, the male then provides protection from the circling, cannibalistic females as well as from ants, whom look on from the bankside, like hymenopteran incarnations of the child catcher from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, ready to snatch his offspring as soon as his back is turned. The male works tirelessly fending off attacks from those who will do his kin harm. I felt inspired, I would provide protection for my little water bug, fending off the cannibalistic females and hymenopteran child catchers. I began to look upon all the women around me with suspicion, which one would try to consume my child first? What were they all doing in the maternity ward? It was all very suspicious. So I had found my sense amongst this madness of early parenthood, I was the protector of my brood. I glanced over to my son, wrapped in a blanket and lying awake in his cot. My confidence swelled, I felt as if I now knew what to do. At that moment, an ear piercing cry rang out, as the racket built, I strode over to the side of his cot (checking the surrounding area for cannibalistic females) picked up my child and said "have no fear, your *Kirkaldyia deyrolli* is here", the crying continued. The feelings of despair started to return. Looking to my partner with a blank expression, I gestured as if to say "what's the problem here, there are no threats", "he's tired, you'll need to help him to sleep" she replied, reading my uncertainty. "What?!, Mr *deyrolli* didn't tell me about this!" "What do I do" I panicked. I need another insect.