

Pox, Lice & Other Vermin 11-09-06

My computer was recently contaminated by a nasty virus. Much to my embarrassment, my e-mail account shared this virus with my colleagues, family and closest friends. My phone rang off the hook with people informing me that I was infecting the world.

I experienced a sickening moment of déjà vu. And then I remembered.

As a young mother, I experienced this same sort of humiliation when my three very affectionate, social children shared lice, pox and other common vermin of childhood.

First it was chicken pox. We took our three-year-old to a party where she hugged every other child present. That night in the bath, I saw the first of those ominous poxes. A couple weeks later, five of her closest friends broke out, just in time for Christmas. Happy holidays from our family to yours.

Soon after, I was combing our first grader's hair after her daily shampoo. Repulsed, I saw a tiny black bug crawling on the back of her head. A further search revealed three more critters, as well as a scattering of miniscule, pearly white eggs attached to several strands.

Horrors! I thought only neglected children got head lice! My children were bathed, buffed and shampooed with ferocious regularity. How could this happen to my darling daughter?

With a panicky realization, I turned to my other two offspring. Sure enough, I found two or three lice and another nest of nits on their heads.

My husband raced to Walgreen's, where he bought several bottles of pesticide-laced shampoo suggested by the kindly, bemused pharmacist. We scrubbed those three heads with a vengeance. Then we removed those nits, one by one, from the silky strands.

The next morning we began the rounds of public confession.

We headed to the first grade classroom where the school nurse identified six more children with head lice. Next stop was the preschool where our four-year-old attended. Yep, her two favorite playmates were infected as well.

Finally, we trudged to the church nursery where our one-year-old had spent some time. No other babies were infected, but we did rewash all the crib sheets, just in case.

Our public humiliation was complete. In consideration of others, we had to confess again and again about our family's scourge.

But we all learned from the experience. We learned pride-consuming humility, swallowed in a huge dose. We learned a lesson or two about judging other families. And we learned about the helpful power of humor.

While parenting is serious business, it presents us with a full quiver of experiences. Many are best approached with a sense of humor and perspective. Head lice (and other vermin) can teach us to laugh about the seldom perfect state of our own humanity.