

It's hard work being an earth mother...

feature

I like to think of myself as a pretty environmentally responsible citizen, writes Lexie Williamson. I dutifully dismantle Shreddies boxes for recycling, cajole my car-loving son into walking to school while his friends zoom past in 4x4s and receive a box full of unidentifiable earth-encrusted vegetables (sourced from fairly-paid, local farmers naturally) on my doorstep every week.

In fact I'm a bit obsessive about being green; the problem is that being a friend of the earth 24/7 in 2005 with two kids is hard graft and more than a little confusing. I clock up a stack of green points one day and feel very wholesome when the next thing I know they've vanished. Take cooking, for example. Although I recycle my cardboard food packaging I realise that the mantra now is 'reduce' not just 're-use' and 'recycle' so I resolved to cut down on our TV dinner habit and cook a meal entirely from scratch.

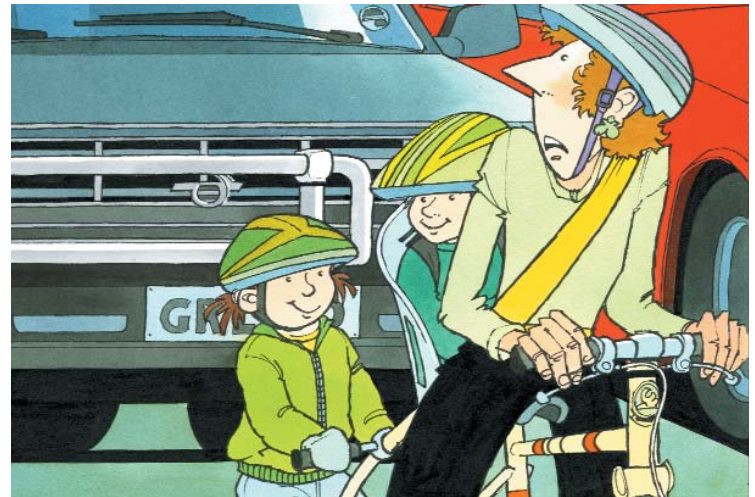
So, with the toddler wailing and wrapping himself rugby tackle-style around my legs I shuffle around for an hour and a half and emerge triumphant - from a kitchen that looks like a bomb site - brandishing Jamie Oliver's Fantastic Fish Pie. The only hitch, though, is that I've used cod - an endangered species - and the packet (more plastic!) says 'flown from Iceland to maintain freshness' so I'm not only guilty of destabilising an ecosystem but am responsible for a few hundred food miles. Do I eat the pie or flagellate myself with the remaining parsley?

When my organic box of strange fruit and vegetables (prickly pears and green pointed cabbage) runs out I head to the supermarket but find that food shopping is no simpler. I dither in front of the bananas wondering whether to opt for fairly traded or organic. I plump for organic - but do feel guilty about the Honduran farmer I've just ripped off.

The supermarket does sell organic tomatoes, although the packaging is compostable. I calculate that each little cherry-on-the-vine tomato costs about 30p and conclude that there are limits to all this organic business and the buck stops with 30p tomatoes. The last items on the list are toilet paper and bread; so I get recycled paper, patiently explaining to my son that, no, no one has fished it out of our loo to make a new roll, and an organic loaf that you could knock someone out with. So far so good.

At the checkout the queue of old ladies and builders on their lunch break stare at me as I empty my mish mash of Marks & Spencer, Waitrose and other 'bags for life' onto the counter ready for packing. I feel like a sandal-wearing, Guardian-reading, leftie, loony and also a bit of a cheat as I pile sons and shopping into the car and sheepishly drive the quarter of a mile back home.

Transport-wise I do try to walk whenever possible and cannot understand the mentality of many who will, for example, climb into their cars to drive the five minutes to the gym and then stroll happily on the treadmill for 20 minutes. On the other hand I freely admit that I am not willing to stand at a bus stop with my two children in the rain and make three changes of bus to get to my mum's house five miles away.



I also like the idea of getting the kids hooked up to a bike, maybe towing them behind in a little trolley as they do in Denmark. But then Denmark has lovely wide cycle lanes and here they'll be eye-to-eye with the bull bars of a 4x4. I lose my nerve.

And like everyone, I do drive when I shouldn't. A classic example is when I joined my local Friends of the Earth group. As the evening meeting loomed I couldn't find a light for my bicycle and ended up driving half a mile up the road and hiding the car in the car park around the corner. This was fine until the end of the night when I was forced to wave cheerily goodbye to the group and walk off down the road, only to sneak back guiltily to the car park when they'd gone.

I suspect they already know I'm a struggling environmentalist. It could have been the day I invited them round for a barbeque that did it. The pot-bellied real ale fanatic couldn't conceal the look of disgust on his face as I handed him an ice-cold Stella and his wife cast a disapproving eye over the supermarket-bought bread and spreads as she handed me a still-warm, home-made chili and cheese loaf.

The day didn't get any better when my son decided to demonstrate his water rocket which uses the equivalent of a small reservoir to propel itself into the air. 'They're gonna chuck you out,' sniggered my husband from behind a haze of barbeque smoke. 'You're burning fossil fuels, wasting water, the ale's not real and the beef's not organic.' Redemption came in the form of our small plum tree; I handed out plastic bags (recycling old ones of course) and invited my guests to pick their own; I even got a jar of plum chutney in return a week later.

In the end my green credentials were restored; that is, until next year when my family and I board a dirty great 747 to jet off for our skiing holiday in France producing the CO2 equivalent of an estimated 1,000 car trips to school and back.

As I said, it's not easy being a genuine earth mother.