



THE FAMILY COLLEGE

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THE
FIELD GUIDE
FOR FAMILIES

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*A Hilarious, Genuinely Useful Course in Bedtimes,
Relatives and Staying on the Same Team*

FIRST EDITION

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ONE DEGREE IN KINSHIP (HONS)

THE FAMILY COLLEGE

The Field Guide for Families

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First edition, 2026.

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This is a work of humour. The case studies and characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, living, related or currently not speaking, is coincidental. The book offers general, light-hearted guidance. It is not a substitute for professional counselling or for medical, legal or financial advice, and nothing in it replaces the advice of your own midwife, health visitor, doctor or social worker. Telephone numbers and web addresses for support services were correct at the time of publication and may change. The Family College is not an accredited institution, and its degrees, though heartfelt, are not recognised by any government.

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Typeset in Lora and Source Sans 3.

For those who turn up.

*To everyone who has driven forty minutes to watch six
minutes of a recorder concert, and clapped as though it were
the Proms.*

The Faculty saw you at the back.

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Orientation: A Word from the Registrar

Welcome to the Family College.

A family is the only organisation most of us will ever join without an interview. Nobody checked your references. You were not asked whether you wanted a brother. The post of parent, if you hold it, was filled without a handover, by a person who had last been in sole charge of a houseplant. And the people who trained you, such as they were, learned the job from people who had never been asked either.

This book fills the gap. It is a complete course in thirty short lectures, from the weeks before a child arrives to the day your own parents start needing lifts. Along the way there are case studies, sentences you may borrow and small examinations that can be passed while waiting outside a swimming lesson. It is meant to make you laugh. It is also meant to make you slightly easier to live with, and the Faculty has never accepted that those are separate aims.

WHO THE COURSE IS FOR

Any adult who belongs to a family, which is most of them. You may be a parent, a step-parent, a foster carer, a grandparent, an aunt, a grown-up child, somebody's exasperated older sister or one half of a household of two. The lectures on small children are addressed to whoever is doing the looking after. The later ones are addressed to whoever is still answering the telephone.

The College makes no assumption about how your family was put together. Children arrive by birth, adoption, fostering, surrogacy and fertility treatment, and adults arrive by marriage, by

choice and occasionally with a van. One parent is a full complement. So are two mothers, two fathers, a grandmother, or four friends who have had lunch together every Sunday for eighteen years. Throughout, the other adult in your house is “your partner” or “your co-parent”, and if there is no other adult, the Faculty has written those passages for you as well.

HOW THE COURSE WORKS

Each chapter is one lecture, with a course code, because the Registrar enjoys issuing them. Every lecture has the same parts:

- **A case study**, featuring one of our students. All are fictional. If you recognise your own kitchen, the Faculty apologises.
- **The lecture itself**, in short sections.
- **A ruling from the Registrar**: one line worth remembering.
- **Boxes**: sentences to try, errors to avoid, kit to assemble, translations, reports from the staff room and, where it matters, the small print.
- **A cheat sheet** of three things, for readers in a car park.
- **The examination**: three questions, each with one right answer, one tempting wrong one and one that has never been chosen by anybody who had slept. The Registrar’s notes give the answers. Where the subject is serious, the Examinations Board has left the jokes out.
- **A field assignment**: one small thing to do this week. This is the part that changes anything.

Read it in order, as a degree, or open it at the lecture that matches this week’s difficulty. The Examinations Board recognises both methods, and a third, in which the book is left open in the bathroom.

THREE RULES OF THE INSTITUTION

First, the jokes are on us. The comic target of this book is the adult holding it: your threats, your rotas, your voice when you say you are perfectly calm. It is never the children, who appear

throughout as what they generally are, which is observant and correct. It is never a partner, an ex-partner or anybody's mother. Nobody in these pages is mocked for their age, their body, their faith, their culture or the way their family came to exist.

Second, there are no tricks. You will find no techniques here for managing a relative, winning an argument with a teenager or getting a child to do anything by stealth. The advice is the kind a good family therapist or health visitor would recognise: say what you mean, do what you said, listen before you rule, mend things after you break them. Where a lecture touches on a child's safety, on grief or on harm inside a family, the jokes stop at the adult reader and the advice is given straight. You will be able to tell.

Third, one idea at a time. Please do not attempt all thirty lectures by Friday, or announce them to the household at dinner. Choose one thing, try it for a week and come back for another.

IF THIS BOOK WAS A GIFT

If someone gave you this book, try not to read too much into it. It may have been a hint. It may equally have come from a person who watched you put a small child's shoes on the wrong feet twice in one morning and wished you well. In either case they were thinking of you. Say thank you, and consider yourself enrolled.

One last thing. However well you do, never say to a relative, at any gathering, "Well, according to Lecture Fifteen..."

With academic affection,

The Registrar

The Family College

The Entrance Examination

Before enrolment, every student completes a short diagnostic paper. There is no pass mark. There is a result, and somebody you live with could have predicted it. Circle what you would actually do, not what you would do if the health visitor were marking.

1. The family is going out for the day. You:

- a. Produced the itinerary last week. It has a wet-weather annexe.
- b. Promise ice cream before anyone has found their shoes.
- c. Learn about the outing in the hall, from a child, as it is leaving.

2. A small relative is lying face down in the cereal aisle. You:

- a. Consult the plan you made for this, and then the back-up plan.
- b. Open a packet of something. This usually works.
- c. Become very interested in the porridge oats.

3. An older relative offers some advice you did not ask for. You:

- a. Reply with three sources and a diagram.
- b. Agree warmly, and then agree with the relative who says the opposite.
- c. Say “Mm,” and go to see whether the car is still there.

4. The family group chat asks who is bringing what on Sunday. You:

- a. Have already circulated a list, with initials.
- b. Reply “Me!!” and a row of small cakes, to no item in particular.
- c. Find the message a week on Friday.

5. Somebody in the house has plainly had a bad day. You:

- a. Draw up some options for them.
- b. Suggest a takeaway and a film, loudly, to change the weather.
- c. Give them some space. A good deal of space. You are in the garage.

RESULTS

Mostly a: The Head of Operations. Nothing in your household happens by accident, and nothing happens without you. You know where the swimming kit is, when the forms are due and which child will not eat the yellow ones. You are tired, and you have made yourself very hard to help. Begin with FC 107 (The Mental Load, Itemised) and FC 117 (A Home, Not a Hotel).

Mostly b: The Entertainments Committee. You are the fun one, and you would like everybody to be happy at once. Your yes is warm and immediate. Your no has not been seen since the spring, and somebody else is having to say it for you. Report to FC 108 (One Answer, Two Adults) and FC 115 (Discipline Without Drama).

Mostly c: The Lodger. You are calm, good-natured and slightly surprised by events. You love these people and would do anything for them, on being told what it was. Proceed directly to FC 101 (Expecting, in the Plural) and FC 127 (The Family Group Chat).

A mixture: The Ordinary Relative. Congratulations. You run things on Monday, bribe everybody on Wednesday and are in the garage by Friday. This book was written for you. Begin at Lecture One.

PART ONE

The New Intake

Getting ready, the first six weeks, the visitors and the adults holding the baby.



FC 101 Expecting, in the Plural

FC 102 The Nursery Is Not the Point

FC 103 The Village, Assembled

FC 104 The First Six Weeks

FC 105 Looking After the Grown-Ups

"All applicants are accepted. Most were not consulted."

Expecting, in the Plural

However the child arrives, everyone in the house is expecting



CASE STUDY

By thirty-one weeks Ifeoma had read four books, attended every appointment and learned to say “pelvic floor” to strangers in a normal voice.

Ewan had an app. Each Monday it told him which fruit or vegetable the baby now resembled, and each Monday he passed this on. “Butternut squash this week,” he would say, like a man reporting from the front.

He had not been idle. He had painted the small bedroom twice. He had built the cot, found the instructions and built it again. What he had not done was come to an appointment, because of work. Afterwards he would ring from the car park and ask, “So what did they say?”

At thirty-one weeks he came. The midwife talked for some minutes about the birth, about feeding and about whom to telephone and when. Then she asked whether they had any questions.

Ifeoma had six, written down.

Ewan had one. “Is it still a squash?”

The midwife considered him. “It’s a baby, Ewan,” she said. “It was always going to be a baby.”

Nobody is a spectator

A child can join a family by birth, by adoption, through fostering, through surrogacy or after years of treatment. The preparation differs a great deal. What does not differ is that every adult who will be living with the child is expecting it.

This sounds obvious. In practice one person usually ends up doing the visible work, because they are carrying the baby or because the adoption paperwork has their handwriting on it. The other drifts into the role of interested supporter, a sort of well-wisher with a key.

Ewan was not lazy. But he had cast himself as the audience, and an audience waits to be told what happened.

The remedy is to take a whole job. Choose something that needs doing and make it yours from start to finish: the car seat, the leave forms, the question of who looks after the dog. “Tell me what to do” does not count, and FC 107 explains why.

If you are preparing on your own, the same principle works in reverse. Pick one trusted person and give them one real job. You are not appointing a second parent. You are making sure you are not the only one who knows where the hospital bag is.

THE REGISTRAR RULES

*If you will be getting up in the
night, you are expecting. Start now.*

Appointments are for both of you

Go when you can. The person receiving the care decides who is in the room, and if they would like you there, be there, having read the leaflet.

Agree beforehand what you want to ask, and write it down. Appointments are short and full of new words, and most people leave having forgotten the one thing they came to find out. If you do not understand something, say so. “Could you put that another way?” has never offended a midwife.

When you truly cannot attend, do better than “So what did they say?” Ask to join by telephone, or read the notes that evening and come back with a question. For adoption and fostering meetings, ask the team which of you should come to which, since they will have views.

Try Saying

- “Which appointments would you like me at? I’ll book the time off now.”
- “I’ll take the car seat. All of it. You don’t need to think about it again.”
- “Could you explain that once more, in ordinary words?”
- “I’m excited, and I’m frightened about the money. Can I say both?”

The plan, loosely held

A birth plan is a fine thing to write. So is an arrival plan for a child coming by adoption, or a list of what a foster placement will need on the first night. Writing it makes you think, and it tells the people looking after you what matters to you.

It is not an agreement with the baby. Placements change date. Labour takes its own view.

Sort the plan into three piles. What matters most: who is with you, how you want to be spoken to, what would frighten you. What would be nice: the music, the lighting, the particular blanket. And what you will do if it all changes, including who gets telephoned at four in the morning.

Then follow the professionals on the clinical decisions, and keep your voice on everything else. Flexible does not mean silent.

Feelings arrive before the child

Delight and dread turn up together, often in the same afternoon. This is normal for people about to be handed a human being, and it applies to every adult in the house.

Say them out loud, and say your own. “I’m looking forward to it, and I’m worried about how we’ll manage the evenings” is a sentence somebody can answer. “Are you even ready for this?” is a test, and nobody passes.

When the other person talks, find out what they want before you supply it. “Do you want me to listen, or do you want us to make a plan?” saves a great deal of well-meant advice. If the worry is heavy, or does not lift, or is getting in the way of ordinary life, tell your midwife, your GP or your social worker. That is what they are for, and they have heard it before.

Ewan, the Faculty is pleased to report, attended every appointment after that one. He took the car seat as his own and had it checked. The app still sends him a vegetable every Monday. He no longer passes them on.

When it is hard to get here

The Faculty will not be joking in this section.

For many people the road to a child is long, and some of it is very sad. There may be years of tests and treatment. There may be losses that nobody else knew about. There may be an adoption process that takes longer than a pregnancy and asks more questions.

Go easy on each other. Two people rarely grieve at the same speed or in the same way, and a different reaction does not show who minded more. Ask what would help today, because it may not be what helped last week.

To everyone else: do not ask when, do not promise that it will happen and do not say that everything happens for a reason. “I’m here, and I can bring dinner on Wednesday” is worth more than any of them. Sands and Miscarriage UK, listed at the back of this book, support people after the loss of a baby or a pregnancy.

Common Exam Errors

- “So what did they say?”, asked from a car park.
- Painting a room twice, as a substitute for reading one leaflet.
- A plan with timings to the minute, presented to a person who has not been born.
- “Have you had it yet?”, sent daily to the mother from week thirty-eight.

CHEAT SHEET

- ☒ Every adult in the house is expecting. Take one whole job and own it.
- ☒ Go to the appointments you are wanted at, with questions written down.
- ☒ Hold the plan loosely, and say the hopes and the worries out loud.

The Examination

1. Ewan's most useful contribution before the birth would be:

- a. Taking one whole job, such as the car seat, and seeing it through.
- b. Painting the small bedroom a third time, to be sure.
- c. Announcing the vegetable each Monday in a louder voice.

2. A birth plan or arrival plan is:

- a. A contract, enforceable against the baby.
- b. A useful statement of what matters to you, held loosely.
- c. Best kept secret from the midwife, so that it comes as a surprise.

3. Your partner says they are frightened about becoming a parent. You say:

- a. "You'll be fine," and change the subject to the pram.
- b. Nothing, and book them on to a course without mentioning it.
- c. "Tell me. Do you want me to listen, or shall we work something out?"

REGISTRAR'S NOTES

1 (a). A whole job, from start to finish. The bedroom is already the best-painted room in the county. 2 (b). It tells people what matters to you. The baby is not a party to it. 3 (c). "You'll be fine" is kind, takes four seconds and ends the conversation.

FIELD ASSIGNMENT

Each of you writes down one hope and one worry about what is coming, and then you swap. Read the other person's twice before you say anything. If you are preparing alone, write both and read them to the person you have chosen to lean on.