

Beating festive stress

THE cosy festive images of families enjoying Christmas together around a beautifully decorated tree are idyllic – but often a far cry from reality.

The stresses of mass catering, over-excited children, entertaining extended families and tight budgets mean family Christmases can often be more fraught than festive.

To help stressed-out parents Mumsnet, the online community of parents, has compiled a guide including recipes and gift suggestions, relationship advice and money-saving tips.

In addition, the Mumsnet team has put together some of the best suggestions by Mumsnetters on how to have a cracking family Christmas.

- Let the credit crunch be an excuse to buy people presents you know they actually want, instead of just grabbing at stuff you think is good present fodder – that's real value for money;"
- Buy decent 'family' presents instead of separate ones. So, a game of Pictionary instead of four or five smaller gifts. Getting family gifts is great, and you can have a bit of togetherness using them too.

For the kids

- Get hold of a Christmas edition of their favourite comic and roll it up as one of their stocking presents – it will not only take up plenty of space relatively cheaply, but will also keep them occupied reading it if they wake up horribly early on Christmas morning.

For the cooking

- Offer to do the cooking and prepare well ahead, then you get to spend the best part of the day pottering around in the kitchen listening to the Christmas carols on the radio missing the squabbles and hiding from the in-laws.

● To make sure sure you see the whole family host a buffet, an few days before Christmas. It's easy and makes sure everyone gets to see everyone else.

- Don't be a martyr – if the relatives are too much to cope with all at once, tell them, and try to negotiate some turn-taking.

- And remember that no one really has a joyous Nigella-style Christmas.

The baby I never thought I'd have



THE BEST CHRISTMAS EVER: Little Millie Fitzgibbon, with proud mum Laura and dad Darren

NEW mum Laura Fitzgibbon has little doubt that this will be her best Christmas ever. And it's all thanks to a little bundle of joy called Millie.

"There were times when I never believed I'd ever be a mum so now to celebrate such a special time of year with our little girl is wonderful," says Laura who is married to Darren and lives in Halewood.

"We've been through so much to have our daughter. I look at her every day and think what a miracle she is." Millie's arrival five and a half months ago came after both a long struggle to conceive and, prior to that, an emotional rollercoaster covering the past few years.

It began back in 2001 when Laura's best friend Lee died suddenly as a result of a previously undiagnosed heart condition.

"We had known each other since we were 11 and his death knocked me off my feet.

"I'd met Darren when I was 17 and always knew he was the one for me. We'd booked our wedding for May 2002 but there was no way we could go ahead with it after Lee's death so we rearranged it for the following year." But the following January – a year to the day after Lee's funeral – Laura

by **SUSAN LEE**

was returning home from watching a football game at a local pub when her car hit black ice.

"Darren was away working and I didn't want to be in the house on my own on the anniversary of the funeral," explains Laura, 34.

"I don't remember anything about the crash. All I recall is waking up in hospital after being in a coma, with Darren and my family around me."

In fact Laura's car had hit a lamppost and she suffered severe head injuries. She was placed in a medically induced coma in intensive care and her family feared she may not live but she slowly battled back to health, spending two months in a brain injury rehab unit.

But she was advised by doctors that her plans for a May wedding would have to be cancelled. "We were disappointed but understood."

And so it was third time lucky when the couple finally made it down the aisle in May 2004, tying the knot at St Bernardet's Church, Allerton, before a honeymoon in Mexico.

Just a year later they decided to start trying for a baby.

"We always knew we wanted a family. It never occurred to either of

us there would be a problem."

But after some months of trying she consulted her GP who eventually referred her to the Liverpool Women's Hospital where doctors diagnosed Laura as having endometriosis. The couple then began fertility treatment.

"It was very stressful, the month after month of hoping and then nothing happening," recalls Laura, a former logistical planner for a drugs company.

"People would ask: 'any news?' and that just made it worse. I'd stopped drinking and smoking, ate only organic food. I couldn't have done any more. I thought 'After all we've been through, it's just not fair.' It made me resentful, even bitter.

After her mum cut out an ECHO article about the Cheshire Natural Health Clinic, based near Warrington and which specialises in complimentary therapies, Laura decided to look for alternatives to her fertility problems.

"This article was about a woman who struggled to have a baby, went to the clinic and succeeded. I was desperate to conceive so I'd try anything. I thought if she could do it, why couldn't I?"

She underwent courses of reflexology as well as having consultations with a hypnotherapist

and specialists in Chinese and natural herbs.

"It was explained that my body was doing all it could to combat the stress I'd been under so shut down all non essential things like having a baby. It made perfect sense."

Within months she was pregnant. The couple were elated but joy turned to heartache when she miscarried. "We were both devastated but we had to take a positive from it and that was the fact that we now knew my body could get pregnant."

Finally their patience paid off and on July 17 this year baby Millie arrived.

"We were ecstatic. "I used to coast along in life and think: 'what's the point?' Now I know what the point is – it's Millie and my role of being a good mum to her."

Now she and Darren are looking forward to waking up on Christmas morning with their new daughter.

"Darren wants to buy her all the toys in the shop! But she deserves to be spoiled.

"We each wrote in each other's cards that this will be the best Christmas ever. "And it will."

● For more details contact Cheshire Natural Health on 01925 730123. www.cheshrenaturalhealth.co.uk