

Our credit crunch commune: Feeling the pinch? These three families were - and found a VERY 21st-century solution



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Last summer, Maria Roberts was living a pretty dreary existence. There she was, single mother to a nine-year-old son, living in a small, two-bedroom house on a Manchester estate, getting by on the money she earned as a writer.

'I felt I was failing,' she says. 'I didn't want my son growing up in a pokey flat in a rundown area.'

Fast forward to 2009 and life is very different. Home is a spacious four-bedroom house in a leafy South London suburb, with two reception rooms, a state-of-the-art kitchen and an airy dining room with French doors that lead to a 60ft lawned garden. This is where son Patrick can be found playing football with the other males of the household. For Maria and her son now share a home - and much of their lives - with two other single-parent families: Andrew Fleetwood, 36, and his son Bradley, four, and Laverne Hunt, 43, and her two daughters Isabella, ten, and Libby, eight. To many parents, the prospect of sharing a home with other families is terrifying. And all three admit there have been tears, rows and simmering annoyances.

And yet, overall, they are convinced it has made their lives richer, more secure and happier. 'We were all so lonely, struggling on our own, but by joining forces we have gained so much,' says Maria. 'Patrick doesn't see his father and he doesn't have siblings, but now he has a man to look up to and there are always children to play with.'

Maria's experience of parenthood has never been conventional. She found herself pregnant at 19 while still at university in Leeds, and her on-off, four-year relationship with Patrick's father was turbulent. The pair are no longer in contact. And so Maria found herself living alone and surviving on a shoestring. She is the first to admit she struggled.

Maria found her ideal housemates via the internet. Laverne, a documentary film-maker, was first. As Laverne was in London already, she started looking for houses to rent and suggested good schools too.'

'As single parents, none of us would be able to afford a house like this,' she says. 'Now we are splitting it between three of us, it is manageable. 'I like being able to afford luxuries that many other single parents would have to give up, such as theatre trips, nice clothes - and even an au pair! 'I had to sell or give away a lot of my stuff when I moved in, and my books are all in the shed because there's lots less storage space.'

Laverne adds: 'I wondered if the neighbours would think we were lesbians when we moved in together, but now we have a father living here, it's the perfect arrangement. 'Andrew is a really great addition. It's really good for the children to have a male figure in the house. Despite jokes from friends, there is no chance of any romance between Andrew and either of the mums. Indeed, since moving in, he has met someone and spends the part of the week he doesn't have Bradley at his girlfriend's home.'

Everyone agrees on the biggest drawback: the lack of time alone. 'If you're in a bad mood and just want to sulk in your room, someone will knock at the door,' says Maria. It also makes dating rather complicated, as Laverne recounts.