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**Dr Mark  
Dooley**



**MORAL MATTERS**

## Summer camp? No, we cherish days of Batman on the stairs

**T**HEIR eyes could not conceal the terrified anticipation. It was as if they were about to be sentenced for a grievous crime they did not commit. Some looked so desperate you wanted to console them with a comforting embrace.

And then the forced smiles as little Bill and Ben came bounding out of class for the last time before the summer break. The sheer joy of having no school for two months was overshadowed by the panic of their parents. How would they survive the tempest for eight long weeks? The house was surely doomed.

That was the last thing I expected to encounter on the final day of term in our school yard. I imagined a sea of smiling parents, euphoric at the prospect of spending quality time with their little boys. But no, desolation was the order of the day.

Since then, I have spoken about this to various people, all of whom confirmed I was in the minority when it came to the summer holidays. It seems most parents dread them but not because they don't want their youngsters at home. No, the problem is how to entertain them for such a protracted period.

In a world hooked on entertainment, children's expectations are much greater than they were in my day. Making your own fun is no longer an option, hence the 'summer camp' which generally runs for the month of July. Swimming, tennis, soccer... you name it, there is a camp that covers it.

During the last week of term, schoolyard conversations revolve solely around 'the camp'. So popular is the phenomenon that places are at a premium. It is the perfect way to limit domestic destruction for at least a month.

My children have an aversion to the word 'camp'. When, last week, we suggested they might like to try a tennis camp, there were such howls of horror we simply dropped the idea. For them, it is just too much like school.

This is not to say that sending children to camp is a bad thing. It has many advantages, not least a strong social element that is vital for their development. It also keeps them outdoors and away from technology.

Still, I can't help lamenting those times when children had no other option but to make their own fun. The secret for parents is to ensure there is a rigid structure in place, one from which you deviate at your peril. For it is then that all hell breaks loose and the long summer becomes something akin to a living purgatory.

The first week of the holidays was a

bit like that for us. The boys were so high on freedom that the mayhem started shortly after dawn. It did not cease until sundown, when their parents, who by then resembled two prehistoric cadavers, collapsed in a heap on the floor.

This week, however, things are settling down nicely. The novelty of liberty having worn off, the boys are less like Animal from The Muppet Show. They are adapting to our routine and discovering that they don't always have to depend on their parents to provide fun.

Mrs Dooley takes the morning shift and I take over in the afternoon.

As I work, she structures the early part of their day with various activities and chores. She also insists that they spend time playing alone or with each other.

The reality is that children will always find something to do.

There is no limit to their imagination, no constraint on their ability to create a wonderful world out of nothing. That is why it is not unusual, when taking a break from my desk, to encounter a caped crusader or Willy Wonka on the stairs.

**M**Y job is to take them for an outing after lunch. More than anything else, they love going to the many natural amenities that surround us. It doesn't matter if it is the beach, the park or the pier, for the fun is found in simply running around.

On Monday, for example, we walked the length and breadth of Killiney Hill. Even our three-year-old stuck the pace because he was so absorbed by the dogs, the tall trees and 'Thomas the Tank Engine' on the Dart tracks below. Best of all, it didn't cost us a cent.

Back home, the boys went calmly about their business. As we prepared the evening meal, we realised we had established a routine that works for everyone. And while the house is not completely free of frenetic energy, it is a much more peaceful place than it was a week ago.

I confess that I love having our boys around for the summer months. At times it is not easy but it certainly beats the heartache of kissing them goodbye at the school gate. It also gives them the opportunity to flourish in ways restricted by the school term.

As I never tire of saying, our time with them is short and precious. Before we know it, the summer months will be our own, empty silence having replaced the frenzy. So try to greet the prospect of their holidays with a smile.

There will be plenty of time to despair – but, thankfully, not yet.

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