

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

Everyone has a part to play in tackling obesity

AS Dr Donal O'Shea says, the sad thing about our report today into early signs of heart disease among 15-year-old boys is that it is not all that surprising. For several years now, experts like Dr O'Shea have been warning that something like this would be the inevitable consequence of the childhood obesity crisis.

What is likely but, thankfully, not necessarily inevitable is that these teenagers will suffer heart attacks or strokes in their 30s and 40s.

Early indications of heart disease of this kind can be fully reversed by proper exercise and diet. The challenge for us as a nation is to make sure that this is done – and done fast.

It is, for example, absolutely scandalous that Irish schoolchildren spend less time in PE classes than in any other EU country.

Resources are stretched in our schools, just as they are elsewhere in the public sector; but it costs nothing to put a class through an hour's gymnastics or send them out for a brisk run.

Ultimately, however, the buck stops with parents. If children are allowed develop unhealthy eating habits and a couch potato lifestyle at home – and there is now overwhelming evidence that this is the case – then we can hardly expect our schools to turn them overnight into lean, mean fighting machines.

Unless we as a society collectively face up to this challenge, we are condemning a future generation to untold early deaths and to widespread, chronic long-term illness and the crippling health service bill that goes with it. Warnings are no longer sufficient; we need a national action plan to tackle this crisis.

And everybody – Government, schools and, above all, parents – must play a full and active part.

Law can't be rushed

THE Supreme Court decision not to recognise the genetic mother of surrogate twins as their legal mother will come as a bitter disappointment not just to the parents who brought the case but to all other parents who find themselves in a similar situation.

The reality, however, as Chief Justice Susan Denham made clear, is that there is a gaping hole in our legislation in this regard. It is up to the Government, not the courts, to close that gap: a new law governing surrogacy and parental rights is urgently needed.

Frances Fitzgerald's pledge to have legislation drawn up by year's end is, obviously, to be welcomed. But Mrs Fitzgerald would be advised to make haste slowly; the last thing we want to do is to undermine the legitimate rights of natural mothers and create a fresh problem.

Equally, we cannot ignore the fact that surrogacy is nowadays an increasingly regular occurrence.

If ever there were a case for carefully constructed legislation that accommodates the rights and aspirations of all parties equally, this surely is it.

Another killer series

AND so another series of Love/Hate draws to a close. For five years now, the adventures of Nidge, Fran and their gangland cronies and enemies have gripped the nation.

Season Five, with its twists and turns and feuding, was no exception. Doubtless, tomorrow night's finale will see at least one more well known character meet an unpleasant end; doubtless too, there will be one of those cliffhanger conclusions designed to leave us all on tenterhooks.

But who cares? This is not only the most popular TV series in years; it is also by far the highest quality drama to come out of RTE. Congratulations once again to all involved. And roll on, Season Six.

The Summit of no match for a

In a week when the Web Summit showed us the exciting developments that will revolutionise our world, one writer warns that, valuable as these innovations are, we should never forget the benefits for our children of imaginative play ...and the way it helps them to share laughter and love – and to bond

LAST week, while walking through the airport, I noticed an all-too-familiar sight. In one of the many cafés, there was a family enjoying a coffee. They were gathered at a single table and yet not a word was exchanged. Parents and children were 'plugged in' to their phones, consoles and iPads. They were together, but each was in a solitary world of their own.

Visit any café, restaurant or pub and you will see the same phenomenon: people sitting together, but rarely conversing. People sharing the same space, but indifferent to the existence of their neighbours. Ours is a plugged-in generation that prefers the company of virtual 'friends' to the real thing.

We gather in public only to sit alone staring at a screen.

Gone are the days of the casual conversation, of randomly engaging people with stories and anecdotes. Whether on the train or in the café, we plug in so as to zone out.

At one level, we have never been so connected or in touch with others. We tweet and text our way through the day, belong to numerous social networking sites and multiple chat rooms.

In so doing, however, we seem to have lost touch with real people and the actual world which surrounds us.

What alarmed me most about the scene at the airport, sadly one so common in our society, was how disengaged the children were. As my sons were busy giggling and trick acting, those boys and girls were impervious to the existence of their parents and siblings. They were blind to the passing waves of humanity all around them.

And so it is with the children of Cyberia, a generation estranged from life, love and laughter. It is a generation that endlessly communicates but does not know how to converse – one whose experience of the world is impoverished in every sense.

In plugging them in, we have severed their roots to reality and to a childhood animated by the true joys of play and creative imagination. I first noticed how damaging unfettered technology can be to the development of children when my eldest returned downcast from a party.

'That was the worst party I was ever at,' he exclaimed, before explaining how 'they all sat in a corner playing with their gadgets'. For more than two hours, hardly anyone engaged with him.

If, since then, I have taken a moral stand against 'plugged-in play', it is because it robs children of their creativity, confidence and ability to communicate. In sheltering behind a screen, they become detached from family, friends and the world beyond their window.

Invariably, the result is social and behavioural difficulties which, in the absence of true play, cannot easily be overcome.

Ironically, the reason for my being at the airport last week was to bring our sons to Legoland, just outside London. Lego has always been central to our children's lives. Nothing has the capacity to exercise their imagination more than those little plastic blocks.

Picture this: it is before dawn in the Dooley household. From my study, I hear the pitter-patter of little feet making their way to

SATURDAY ESSAY



by Mark Dooley

the playroom. Suddenly, the house shakes to the sound of the Lego box as it crashes from its shelf to the floor.

After a few minutes, our two youngest enter my room bearing little gifts. Both have created superhero figures which I have no difficulty identifying. As I kiss them, they run off to stage a battle with their new toys.

THIS is creative play at its very best. It binds children together and stimulates their imagination like nothing else. It costs little and yet it provides so much in terms of wonder and fun.

With each new season comes a whole new range of Lego creations which decorate our house.

Compared to the latest console games, these figures may seem quaint and outdated. The truth is, however, that these little models are an expression of our children's attempt to make sense and meaning of their world.

The first thing that strikes you when you enter a place like Legoland is the absence of gadgets. In every corner of that marvellous kingdom, children are building, creating and constructing. They engage with each other and the world as if the temptations of technology did not exist.

Our sons were less interested in the themed rides than in the incredible models on display. Mini cities constructed entirely of Lego sent our middle son into a state of euphoria.

Before long, he was back at the 'Lego Bath' building pumpkins,

the Titanic and, energetically assisted by his brothers, models of his family.

To plug in at such a place would be like lighting a cigarette in a restaurant.

Indeed, there was a place in the park where children could play Lego video games, but it was like an adult casino in the middle of a children's playground. The reason it was always empty was simply because nobody wanted to be there.

It is a terrible indictment of modern society, that we must visit places like Legoland so children can experience the magic of real play. Sitting in the restaurant one evening, I realised that not a single person was plugged in. Families were all eating together – laughing, chatting and genuinely enjoying each other's company. What a contrast, I thought, to the tragic scene I left behind at the airport.

If children flourish in such an environment, it is because they need to play in order to develop, mature and adapt to their world. Without it, they will never acquire a solid sense of identity. Whereas machines and gadgets detach children from others and the

achievements is child's wonder



environment, play teaches them how to belong to both.

Recently, I addressed parents on this issue at a Dublin school. Following my talk, a couple told me a terrifying story. Some years ago, they made the fatal mistake of purchasing a Wii console for their son. Soon after, they noticed he was spending every spare second in front of the screen. Realising they had a serious problem on their hands, they decided to limit his time on the device. When that failed, they simply removed it entirely.

What happened next, they said, defied belief: their son flew into a fury, refusing to do anything but stare at the empty space which the Wii once occupied.

This went on for two weeks, before he finally relented and went outside.

The boy's father told me that he knew all about the horrors of addiction, but he had never witnessed anything so shocking. What worried him most was that he feared his little boy was becoming a recluse, shielded from the world by a screen from which he simply could not detach. Before the Wii, he had enjoyed the pleasures of play,

but now he was a loner hooked up to a machine to which he was fundamentally addicted.

To play is to engage and connect in a way which stimulates both mind and senses. When an infant plays with blocks, he is spreading his personality across the world.

He is endeavouring to shape things in his own image, to make familiar what would otherwise appear strange and threatening.

Real play roots and binds children to nature, neighbours and community. It takes them out of themselves, thereby giving them a sense that they belong to a society. Such is the reason why sport is so crucial for social development.

Without it, children would never know what it means to give of themselves for others.

The plugged-in generation is detached, indifferent and disconnected. They have lost touch with reality - with those vital aspects of life we all require to thrive. For them, 'play', and even sport, is something they do while isolated and alone.

Children deserve much better than that. The parents of that young boy will never permit

another device to enter their home. They have, they believe, saved their son from a form of slavery, and they will never again put at risk his physical and emotional wellbeing.

All parents need to follow their example. We need to re-root our children to the world so that they can once again flourish as they should.

This means following those courageous parents and unplugging them from their devices.

THE wonderful thing is that once you do, it does not take long for the imagination to reboot.

As I have discovered in my own life as a parent, it does not take long for children to leave the isolation of the cave and venture back outdoors.

In place of silence, there is now the sweet sound of laughter and they roll together on the grass, or as they march knee-deep through the soil with bucket and spade in hand.

Neither does it take long for them to start chatting again.

That is why the dinner table must always be a tech-free zone; for it is there, in the company of those they love, that they first learn how to open their souls.

It is there that they learn why chatting online is a travesty of true conversation.

It is very easy to plug children in, very easy to send them off to Cyberia. Once there, however, it is very difficult to get them back. Like those children in the airport, they sit like strangers in a crowd, belonging to nothing and nowhere.

A house filled with Lego may be a lot noisier.

There may be much more chaos and commotion.

That, however, is a small price to pay for holding on to your children and seeing them live life to the limit.

And that is why I shall never tire of hearing that Lego box crash to the floor.

For me, it is not only a source of laughter and wonder.

It reminds me that, so long as they continue playing with those little blocks, my boys will know the true beauty of belonging to a world where they feel totally at home.



Marie Keating
FOUNDATION

Christmas
Lunch



Thursday
December 4th
Shelbourne Hotel
Dublin

Tickets €75
or table of 10 €700

Champagne Reception
12.30pm

For bookings contact
Linda or Fiona at the
Marie Keating Foundation
on 01 628 3728
www.mariekeating.ie

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