

The Benefits Of Boredom

“Mum, I’m soooo bored.” Clearly, it’s my fault. I haven’t lined up two weeks of frenetic activity designed to turn every waking moment of my offsprings’ vacation into a multifaceted, educational-yet-interesting journey of discovery and enjoyment.

Nope! The most exciting things I have planned are an afternoon of making biscuits

and a picnic with friends at the park. Other than that, I am looking forward to two blissful weeks of books in the sunshine, hours spent in the garden, lazy mornings and afternoon naps. But that’s not what my darling children expected.

“Embrace the boredom,” I say. “That’s great, you’re bored! Now you’ll have your very best ideas!”

The dubious looks on the faces of my hopeful progeny quickly give way to dismay, as they realise that I am not going to take them to a theme park, buy them new toys, or sign them up for horse-riding lessons. They are going to be left to their own devices.

Then it gets worse. Dismay turns to abject despair as they plead for leniency. No, you are not going to watch television all day. No, you may not use my computer.

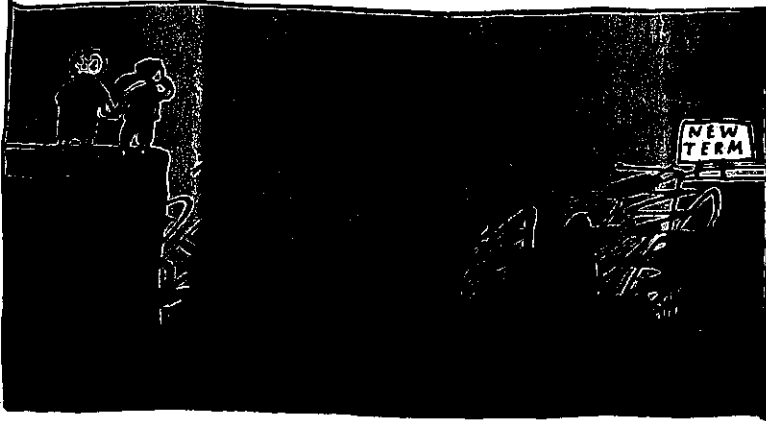


Illustration by Alastair Taylor

Yes, you should actually get dressed and go outside. No really, try it!

Slowly, reluctantly, two school-age children pull on T-shirts and shorts and head towards the back door. They continue to resist their exile into the wilds of our backyard. They take turns for the first half hour to come back in for toilet trips, drinks of water, extra supplies of toys. Injuries abound, most of which are self-inflicted and dramatised to a point that would make Shakespeare blush. Seriously, how many sandpit-related injuries can a child sustain in half an hour?

I am bucking the norm, deliberately avoiding the current trend of scheduling activities for every afternoon, weekend and holiday. I want to let my children grow up at their own pace, take on responsibility only when they are ready for it, and not participate in an activity simply because it’s what all

Emma Ranie is determined to buck the norm by not planning activities for her children throughout the holidays.

the other children are doing. I don’t eschew every activity, but pick and choose the ones that most suit the diverse personalities of my children: choir for the musician, Guides

for the socialite. These activities give us a lot of fun during the school term, but when holidays come, it’s time to rest.

Children’s energy levels and enthusiasm diminish considerably in the course of a school term. That which starts out as fun becomes a chore after 10 or 11 weeks of constant activity. We start each school term with seemingly boundless energy, but as the holidays draw near we drag ourselves from one day to the next.

School holidays, for our family, are a time of renewal. We all take a step back from the everyday life, and take the time to rediscover ourselves and each other. Holidays are a time for creativity and relaxation; a time to stop and let our bodies catch up a little. At first, the children are tentative about all this freedom. They cannot imagine how they will fill a whole day, let alone weeks, without

the structure of a classroom, or teachers and instructors planning and programming each and every moment. But gradually the liberty seeps through, bringing forth a well of creativity that I can only dream of. I know that once I was that free, that certain of the viability of my ideas, that imaginative.

Left to their own devices, the children have forgotten their ‘boredom’, and are deeply embroiled in creating an entire economy based on pebbles and flower petals. They are rebuilding their special sibling friendship – the one that is on the backburner while they are spending so much time with their school pals. They only reluctantly return to the house as the sky darkens, clambering straight into the bath to remove hours of cheerful grime, promising each other that tomorrow they will make kites out of newspaper, write stories of their adventures and collect and record every insect they can discover in our tiny garden.

I look forward to tomorrow. I think I’ll spread a quilt under a tree and read my book with them. A little time away from the daily grind couldn’t hurt. ■