



No school means summer holidays for parents of teenagers who are too old for a babysitter and too young to work. But shouldn't the State help working parents, asks **Kate Holmquist**

School's out for summer – bringing joy to young teenagers, but holidays for their parents. For mums and dads, this is the season to be a teacher or a stay-at-home, rather than having to parent via mobile phone. Office-bound parents text back and forth with children, hoping that they're safe and that they're where they say they are. When kids sleep in until lunchtime, parents are relieved because it means at least they're safe in bed.

Sound negative? It's the reality. "Parents of 12- to 15-year-olds are leaving them to their own devices and relying on them to sleep late until noon or 1pm, then monitoring them by mobile. It's nearly accepted that these kids are home alone. Secondary school kids have 12 weeks of holiday – it's way too long," says Annmarie Wade of schooldays.ie, an online resource for parents and teachers.

"The length of the summer holidays is one of my pet peeves," says Mary Forrest, director of Teen Counselling, which is part of Crosscaire, an initiative of the Dublin Catholic Diocese. "Young teens are beyond babysitting age and yet it's part of Government policy to have women in the workforce. It's hard if there are two working parents, even worse if there's one. It's the teens in first, second and third year, aged 12 to 15, who are really the problem. When they turn 16, they can get jobs. But the ages 12 to 15 are a difficult time."

A plethora of summer camps, many of them residential, endeavour to take young teenagers off working parents' hands, but it's expensive. A day camp costs about €60-€150 a week and a residential camp can run to €500 a week. Forrest says that many working parents, especially those with more than one child, have a stark choice: send the kids to camp or take a two-week family holiday in Spain. Many families cannot afford both.

Keeping the kids at home poses dangers, Forrest warns. "Many parents don't have the option of the expensive camp. I would know from my work in Teen Counselling that parents allow kids to sleep in late until 1pm or 2pm, which means that the kids stay out late, until after midnight. It's a bad habit and other bad things can happen as a result."

What Forrest terms "unhealthy friendships" can develop when children are unsupervised. "Somebody calls someone on the mobile and the next thing there's a mob in the house and the teen is not able to say No at the door. When teens are home alone, they can be victimised, bullied, forced and coerced. We see this all the time and we work hard to show parents that their teens didn't invite the 'friends' in. Things can get out of hand



Their freedom, your fears

and things happen that were never planned or intended," she says.

Angry parents come into conflict with their young teenagers and the situation spirals until August. "When a summer starts badly, it continues badly and by the time they get back to school the parent-child relationship has been damaged," says Forrest.

MORE SENSITIVE, INTROVERTED teens can be "safe" at home but excruciatingly lonely, locking themselves in their rooms with TV, computer games and the internet. Their parents may be grateful their kid is not out on the streets, but isolation can bring too much time to think and depression that lasts far longer than the summer.

"The whole of society has to think

about what happens to families for the three whole months when children have nothing to do," she says.

Rita O'Reilly of Parentline, an advice helpline for parents, agrees: "The whole childcare debate centres around younger children. My experience is that's not where the problem is. Younger children are happy to go to creches, which continue throughout the summer, or they have nannies. Many women work part-time and are able to juggle this around school schedules.

"It's the 10- to 14-year-olds who are the problem. You can't leave them by themselves too long, but many don't want to go to summer camps all day. They don't want to leave the road. They want to be at home." Parents used to be able to hire au pairs in the summer to keep their chil-

dren safe, but au pairs are becoming harder to find. "It's very hard to get au pairs now because there are so many other jobs. It's a dreadful dilemma," says O'Reilly.

Even when parents can afford to pay for a schedule of summer camps throughout the summer, their children may rebel. As O'Reilly points out, 13-year-olds hate being lumped in with seven-year-olds, with whom they have nothing in common. Many a parent has paid the fees, only to find that their child went once to the camp and refused to go again, she says.

Many pre-teens and young teens are happy to go to day-camps specialising in sailing, golf or GAA, but these tend to run from 10am to 3pm. The rest of the day has to be juggled with parents sharing pickups and the home-time responsibilities. "But that's not easy either; if a parent is working a half day, that means the parent is coming home to another job of looking after their own and somebody else's kids," says O'Reilly.

Term-time working for parents is one solution, but it tends to be available only in the Civil Service and in large companies, such as IT, insurance firms and banks. And even then, parents take a pay cut, since their reduced hours are spread over the year.

Besides, the term-time option may be available only as a once-off, or every second or third summer.

"It makes you envy the teachers and the stay-at-home parents," O'Reilly says. The sensible advice to any Leaving Cert student who wants to have a family would have to be, "be a teacher," she adds. "Teachers say their jobs are stressful, but so is my job and so is yours," she adds.

The stress of juggling the summer holidays is something that Wade, of schooldays.ie, is also familiar with. "The trend is that parents are either sending them away to residential camps, or leaving

Sharing caring summer survival tips

◆ Know where your children are and know their friends' parents. Parents who share values around issues such as drugs, alcohol and dating can provide mutual support.

◆ Young teenagers tend to sleep late and become active in the evening. They won't be occupied with homework as they are during the school year. Be prepared to come home from work and spend some fun, active time with the children.

◆ Share supervision with other parents. It takes some organisation, but parents living in an area can agree to take turns supervising each other's children in the afternoons.

◆ When considering an activity or camp as an option, ask the camp management about the supervision they offer.

What are the staff-to-camper ratios? Can they guarantee that they will know where every child is at all times?

One parent told *The Irish Times* of how her two children left a camp premises unnoticed. She learned of their whereabouts when people who knew her telephoned to say they had the children.

◆ If you're choosing a camp, don't pick it because it has long hours rather than an interesting and stimulating programme.

Playing dolls the risk of internet as babysitter

It used to be that playing dolls was all about paper, fabric, Barbies, needles and thread. Today, 10- to 13-year-olds are playing dolls online – comparing fashions in chatrooms with other girls they have never met.

It can work well – with girls playing for hours on end without having to leave the house for the world outside. But when girls start treating other girls as objects, like dolls, without regard to feelings, it can get nasty. And unlike with traditional doll-playing, where a parent is around to intervene, the internet can – like dolly fashion – have no mercy.

Once again this summer, the Internet Advisory Board is warning parents about

the psychological dangers that children inflict on each other when the internet is used as a babysitter.

Social networks such as Bebo, YouTube, mobile phones and game sites, are all prime territory for bullying. The advisory board warns: "Parents and children should remember that the internet is a global, public space. Writing something negative about someone else in a private diary made of paper is very different from writing about her or him in a public forum.

Children need to be reminded that we all have a right to privacy and to our good name. Parents should be aware that very young children can find themselves

using language or expressing emotions on their page which they would not use in a face-to-face situation, this can often have disturbing consequences." When you haven't been invited to a party that your friends were invited to, it can be painful to see the party discussed online – complete with pictures.

And when peers comment online about why certain people weren't invited, this can be soul-destroying for the shunned child.

"Remember, the best person to keep your child safe is you," says the board.

But that's difficult for working parents who aren't at home and have to rely on virtual parenting via mobile phone.

Home alone: 'The whole of society has to think about what happens to families for the three whole months when children have nothing to do.' Photograph: Stockxpert

them home alone. Some parents stagger holidays so that the mother takes two weeks at home, then the father takes two weeks. That leaves a gap of a couple of weeks with kids who are too old for babysitters. If 12- to 15-year-olds don't have an interest they can pursue, then they are just hanging around and left to their own devices.

SO WHAT'S THE solution? Term-time working or reduced summer hours can help. However, "many employers would not be sympathetic to parental leave for teens," says Wade, whose background is in human resources.

Forrest believes that secondary school buildings, empty for most of the summer, should be used as centres of activity and learning for 12- to 15-year-olds, who could take modules in subjects that would earn

them points towards their Junior Cert. The State should accept that its policy of having parents in the workplace has consequences, and as a result should provide parents with an alternative to school during the summers, she says.

The Department of Education funds places for 11,000 students at risk of leaving school early in summer programmes around the State. But families with children who fully intend to stay in school haven't got such support.

Until they get it, parents will continue to juggle time off work with expensive summer camps and – yes – leaving kids home alone to their own devices. It's not often talked about, but lots of parents are doing it.

◆ See also www.ireland.com/theticket/summerevents/

Mumbai or the midlands, you make your own day out



Displaced in Mullingar The story of Granny's trip to Knock, or a tale about Bollywood? **Michael Harding** made the wrong choice

Last week I saw a famous actor coming out of Cocoon, where the swanky ladies shop. I rushed over and asked her what she was doing in Mullingar.

"Oh," she said, "I'm just having a day out." Well it's not often that I find a beautiful actor having a day out, in Mullingar, so I urged her into a coffee shop, and paid for two mochas, and we went upstairs and sat at a table near the window. In my overexcitement I couldn't stop talking.

"Do you know," I said, "that my granny loved a day out? She came with us to Knock

one time, in an Austin A7, and somewhere in Roscommon, we crossed a humpbacked bridge at high speed, and Granny's hat, and head, hit the roof." The actress was taking her coffee like it was medicine, and she wasn't entirely helpful at making small talk.

"So," I said, "you come to Mullingar for the day out! Isn't that interesting?" Mullingar is peppered with attractions. Fancy lingerie shops. Designer shops such as Bentley, Khan, and Benetton. Coffee shops, health shops, and even a therapy shop tucked away on Mount Street, where

the staff massage people's heads for a few euro, to de-stress them from all the shopping.

"Have you been to the de-stress place on Mount Street?" I wondered.

"No," she said, with chilling control. Obviously it was none of my business where she went to de-stress.

Her gaze recalled a politician of the 19th century, whose smile was famously described as being as warm as the copper plate on a coffin.

"What did you buy?" I asked, pointing at her Cocoon bag.

Our coffee break wasn't boring her. By now it was clearly beginning to frighten her. As we stood on the street outside, my lips may have moved a few inches towards her cheek, in anticipation of a warm Thespian farewell, but it was not to be. I could feel a definite resistance, if not horror, at the approach, so we shook hands, and she turned briskly and walked away.

I've never had a "de-stress massage".

When I need to relax I get the train to Dublin. That's what I call a day out.

On the station platform during the week there was a man with a cowboy hat, a blue denim shirt and pointy shoes. He was strutting about like a nervous crow. And watching him apprehensively was an Indian woman, in a duffel coat that hid a nurse's uniform.

I was watching 40 swallows swoop low over the roofs of the town. The only seat available, while waiting for the train, was a bench already occupied by two young girls

in pink anoraks and white jeans. I sat myself down, and they flew off, as young girls do when patriarchal figures approach.

When I lived in west Donegal, just above Carrick Finn beach, I used to spice up my solitary life with weekly trips to Dungloe. Every Thursday was my day out.

The bus was full of old men with woolly hats like tea cosies, and string bags for their messages: little old ladies escaping from the unbearable silence of stone-cold kitchens.

On damp afternoons the interior of the bus was a fog of steam and stale smells. And after seven or eight days living in the mist and rain above a rugged beach, the lights of a fish restaurant in Dungloe were as thrilling as the neon of Times Square.

I remember standing on Bandra beach in Mumbai, one

autumn evening, as a huge orange sun sank towards the turquoise of the Indian Ocean. And among the ladies in saris and the men in colourful pyjamas, I spotted five Muslim women. Each was completely covered in a coarse black abaya.

In a line they faced the sea and did prostrations towards Mecca in grim obedience. But when they were finished praying, they opened a wicker box, and took out soft drinks and sandwiches. They bought bananas from a boy who carried a huge amount on a stick above his head, and they spread a green rug, and they sat on it, and laughed with abandon.

The sun was hanging above the sea like an orange lantern, as they enjoyed the remains of their day out, and I was convinced that, beneath the black, they were just like my granny.

Now that's what I should have told the actor. I should have regaled her with tales of Bollywood, Bandra, and the orange lantern floating above the turquoise sea.

The lights of a fish restaurant in Dungloe were as thrilling as the neon of Times Square