

The great outdoors

Activity breaks in primary school

Many years ago, I was teaching in a disadvantaged area of Dublin. Fresh out of St Pats, I found myself in front of a very challenging group of children, and I was under pressure to keep some of them even mildly interested in school. I found that major inventiveness in terms of drama, music, and sports made a huge difference to their performance in school – not a new discovery by any means, and probably one my college lecturers had mentioned, but I didn't fully understand how it worked until I was in the mix myself.

A brochure arrived to the staff room, offering high adrenaline activity breaks for schools. I noticed surfing on the list of activities, and I was intrigued. Surfing in Ireland? That had to be fun! I decided to pitch the idea to my principal, and to parents, and everyone was enthusiastic. We subsidised the cost by doing a few fundraisers, and suddenly there I was, heading west with a colleague and two sixth classes.

The trip was a total success. The children were very excited at the idea of travelling to the country, and it gave me great leverage in the classroom for the weeks previous. While spending two full days and nights with my 12 year olds seemed daunting, I was totally overwhelmed by the insight gained by working with my kids outside of the classroom. I gained insider knowledge into what the nick-

names were, what kind of music they liked, who could play guitar, who the joke tellers and raconteurs were. The children themselves loved the activities. Kids who did not shine academically gained new kudos for surfing skills, climbing – and the whole trip became a fond reference point for our classroom chats.

From that year on, I took a trip each year, and was never disappointed – there was a huge sense of loyalty and camaraderie between myself and my students, a break-down of classroom formality which enabled us to work much better in the classroom. It became a 'carrot' that worked superbly during the first half of the year. There was no incentive that worked better for me. Many years later, I would meet grown past-pupils, and it was always what they remembered about our school trip. Parents were also very supportive, and really did appreciate the time we spent arranging and running the trips.

There are many reasons that teachers may be dissuaded from travelling with children to a residential centre. However, some of the good school-focused centres make it much easier for teachers to enjoy the break without having to add a whole new workload. Centre staff immediately take over, and while teachers join in where they need to, the responsibility for behaviour, activities and safety is assumed by the centre staff.

Teachers can have a very pleasant break, if they choose a good centre, and there are

some excellent centres working with schools.

Teachers should find out how experienced the centre is in working with primary school groups. Ask for a copy of the Centre Public Liability documentation, and ask to see the consent forms provided for children. Good centres will have individual documentation that you can send straight home, including medical history, code of conduct etc. Ask for information regarding the Child Protection Policy. Ask for references from other primary schools. Ask about staff qualifications.

The cost of a break for students depends on the activities, but you are probably looking at €90 for a one night break and around €160 for two nights. This will usually include meals and activities: equipment, instruction, evening fun and night supervision. The cheapest is rarely the best option: the children need good food and plenty of it, well qualified

instructors, proper fitting equipment, warm beds and showers, comfortable areas for gathering together and competent caring. Teachers should also have comfortable accommodation, and have an option to be accom-

modated in a different part of the centre if they wish.

Teachers should never be asked to stay with students in dorms, or supervise at night time. Good centres have teacher preview weekends. There is usually no cost to teachers, and often centres will subsidise students who cannot afford to make a trip: this will usually be at the discretion of the school principal and the centre.

Outdoor instructors are often great role models for children. They are usually very interested in sport, they will encourage the children to enjoy fit, healthy outdoor pursuits, eat well and healthily, be active and energetic. It is also a great opportunity, should the teacher be inclined, to integrate many other educational topics: geography, topography, climate – there are many interesting field trips that do not have to be high-adrenaline. Issues such as environmental pollution, litter, vandalism of safety equipment – children will be able to relate to why these things are important. I always found surfing to be a brilliant activity for kids – it is 'cool', fun, all kids can try it, it is safe and easy to learn, and children will find a new respect for the ocean. The trip away can provide a starting point or a finishing point for projects, creative writing, art and photography, multimedia... It is an inclusive, all round educational experience. We have a fabulous resource in our landscape, we have some excellent educational centres and I would encourage teachers and principals to make the trip part of the school year.

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Niamh Hamill graduated from St Patrick's College in 1987, and taught in Dublin for 13 years.

