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The summer of fun and fit – or fatter?

Posted on [13th August, 2012](#) | filed under [Education](#), [Featured](#)

Ursula Hirsch Korn ponders whether we could all take a leaf out of 1970's style – and we don't mean flares. Were kids fitter then? And if so why?

When I was growing up in the 70s I don't think I gave my parents that much cause to worry about me. It wasn't that I was an angel (far from it) it's simply that parents hadn't turned fretting about their offspring into the Olympic sport it seems to have become today.

I would ride my bike around the roads where I lived from the tender age of seven without my mother turning a hair. Sure the occasional child did have an accident, but that wasn't enough for our parents to start locking us up in front of the TV for our own safety.

Equally, when I was little the few pounds you put on during a summer of intensive ice-cream eating was called puppy fat and soon dissolved under the harsh regime of PE and kiss chase in the playground, once we were back at school. There was certainly no mention of baby boot camps where children were sent to trim the fat.

Which is why I was dismayed to hear about the advent of a summer fat camp from weight management specialists, MoreLife, designed to keep kids fit over the holidays. Not least because I think one of the most memorable pleasures of my summer holidays was lazing around while scoffing luxuriantly swirled Mr Whippy ice-cream cones.

I am not sure at what point parents decided it was imperative to manage their children's lives in such minute detail. Perhaps it is down to mothers being older and accustomed to managing recalcitrant teams of staff, they simply apply the same strategies to their offspring. Maybe baby boot camp is an infant version of



the corporate bonding weekend – and an equally horrifying prospect.

Or perhaps it is because children's lives have transformed immeasurably from those we led in our youth. While I am usually loath to apply this logic as it reminds me too much of Monty Python's Four Yorkshire men sketch where each vies to have had the hardest upbringing, things genuinely were different back then.

There were very few television shows and no computer games, until the advent of Pong, which as a black and white version of tennis didn't have quite the same appeal as the Xbox Kinect. This meant we had to create our own entertainment and invariably this was a lot more active than slumping on the sofa.

I still recall the hours I spent recreating show jumping courses in my garden and hopping over them on my imaginary pony. While I can understand this type of amusement would hardly compete with a PlayStation, I didn't half have toned legs after a summer of re-enacting Hickstead day after day.

The thing is, my parents never felt the need to intervene. They never banned any foods – in fact our diet was pretty rubbish with lots of Find us frozen pancakes, Arctic Roll and Angel Delight (for which I still have a strange fondness). But it was home-defrosted at least. We never ate fast food – I don't think I had a McDonald's until I was in my late teens and takeaways were confined to the odd Friday night fish and chips or a Chinese for a special treat.

Equally sweets and crisps were rationed, not out of concern for my waistline, but because my disposable income was limited. On about 20p a week pocket money I could hardly go wild in the aisles of our local corner shop, so I had to eke out my 1/4lb of sweets over the week.

While I am aware that it is impossible to turn back the hands of time, maybe instead of sending our kids off to fat camp, we could take a leaf or two out of our parents' book. For starters we could switch off the TV, (withstand the inevitable whining) and you never know – our children might just create their own, possibly mildly dangerous, undoubtedly messy, but probably quite active, entertainment.

Step two could be introducing 70s-style pocket money, in other words, so little that it buys you virtually nothing to rot your teeth or expand your belly with. Again there will be complaints, but that is what parents are for, to absorb the moaning for their children's own good, not silence it with endless indulgence.

I suspect that if we parents simply chilled out and let our kids get on with it, and stopped throwing money at them to keep them quiet, the problem of childhood obesity would begin melting away along with the need for kiddie boot camps.

Let us know what you think about the childhood obesity problem, we'd love to hear your views.

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While I have rather more years of experience of writing for magazines and newspapers than I might like to admit, I suspect that my most recent challenge of attempting to bring up four little boys qualifies me far more than any journalistic achievements to pontificate on child rearing. That said my years of contributing to titles as diverse as The Daily Mail, Parentdish, The Independent, NHS Choices, Conde

Nast Bride, Woman, Ready for Ten and Made for Mums, has at least gifted me the ability to string a sentence or two together. I have also graced the GMTV sofa and held forth during many a radio debate on LBC and BBC Five Live, proving I can talk as well as write.

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