



Rachel Carlyle

Can you survive the holidays without tears and tantrums, asks our expert

One long, hot summer holiday, Karen Doherty's four children did something most parents can only dream about: they played happily together for weeks on end, there was hardly any fighting (them) or shouting (her) – and all for 40 pence. "I'd bought them a square bit of foam board and they spent ages making up a Monopoly game using our local streets," says Karen. "Then they played it all summer."

She admits, however, that this wasn't a typical summer holiday in the Doherty household. "Usually they spend the first week fighting about every single little thing. I let it go on for a few days then try to put an end to it."

Most parents would recognise this second scenario as closest to reality. The first week or two of the school holidays can be hugely challenging: tired children forced to spend more time together than usual, a parent used to having the day to themselves suddenly called upon to arbitrate on whose turn it is to use the yellow felt tip – and endless days of nothingness punctuated by showers of rain.

Sibling rivalry hits a peak in the six-week summer holiday, and is apparently at its worst when there are two children in the family who share a room and the gap is between 21 and 27 months, according to the experts.

"At school they were entertained for eight hours a day," says Georgia Coleridge, Karen's co-author on *Sibling Rivalry* (£12.99; see Bookshop, page 82). "In the holidays they only have each other, which inevitably leads to arguments over anything. I once heard one of mine complain: 'He breathes too loudly, Mum'. Organised parents book their children in for endless events – one friend has a spreadsheet"

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But unless you're working and have no choice, that isn't always the answer: it's better to get through the first few days of pain while they adjust to a slower pace of life. "If you can hold out for a week, they get used to the rhythm of the summer holidays," says Georgia, who has four children between 11 and 19. "One summer, mine spent a month building a tree house. It was never finished but it occupied them for weeks."

In that first week, they advise restricting TV and computers so the children are forced to use their imagination to entertain themselves. Don't get sucked into petty arguments as it's often just a way of getting your attention; they don't actually care whose turn it is to use the yellow felt tip. Instead, encourage them to sort out their own arguments: they're more likely to stick to a solution if it's their idea. "Parents can escalate the situation and make it worse by over-reacting to the fighting," says Karen. "It's often better to walk away and deprive them of an audience."

They advise having a small plan for every day of the first week, such as going for a walk to the park or a bike ride. "It will give everyone something to talk about, otherwise the day can drift into a kind of soup," says Georgia. Inviting friends over and having different combinations of children in the house is also useful for changing the family dynamic.

You certainly don't need to spend a fortune on theme parks, says Jane Brocket, author of *Ripping Things To Do* (Hodder, £17.99. See Express Bookshop, page 82), a collection of games and crafts inspired by classic children's books. "Just set them up, give them some ideas, then melt away into the background," she says. "If you give them the right materials they will really play. I still believe that with a few Playmobil figures, a spade and some mud, children can be happy for hours."

It's worth persevering – if only for the memories they will treasure later on. I don't recall any of the squabbling we did during our summer holidays – but I do remember spending hours making a house in the garden for Action Man and his girlfriend, Sindy, complete with parachute escape hatch. "My dream is that my children will spend the holidays doing really lovely old-fashioned things like making camps under the kitchen table with cushions," says Georgia Coleridge. "Sometimes it just works and you think, 'This is what childhood is all about'. And when you ask adults for their fondest memories, it's always those moments when they mooched around in the summer holidays not doing much." **S**