

While the kids are away

For parents, summer camp provides rare taste of independence

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There is no sensation like the start of camp. Fresh air, new friends, the pang of homesickness and zing of independence pack an emotional wallop for children fortunate enough to go away.

But that's nothing compared to how Mom and Dad feel, now that they finally have the house to themselves.

"It's like being let out of jail," says Daniel Lisser, managing director of Johnson Capital's New York office, who is alone with his wife for the first summer in 11 years. "I'd tell people both kids are going away, and I'd start doing this little dance."

Sending the kids off for the summer has been an annual ritual in the Northeast going back as far as 1861, according to the American Camp Association, which says the nation's first camp was in Washington, Conn.

But in an age when parents' time revolves more and more around their offspring's jammed schedules, the summer camp break provides an increasingly rare taste of what life for grownups used to be like—and what it will be again, when the nest empties for good.

Parents, of course, miss their children when they're away. But the newly freed adults also find themselves relishing the simplest things—like meeting friends for dinner on the spur of the moment, or taking off to Vermont for the weekend, or just, um, lounging around the house.

"The joke is I will need a new pair of track shoes," says Lauren Mandelbaum, a senior account executive at teen Web site Stardoll whose two sons are gone for the first time. "People say to me, 'What are you doing this summer?' And I say, 'Running from my husband.' "

The big treat for some parents is to enjoy that second margarita or other mood-altering substance that they wouldn't indulge in with children around.

Rick Cusick, the associate publisher of marijuana bible *High Times* and a single dad, got to live like "a guy in a dorm room" earlier this summer when his 10-year-old daughter went to camp for the first time.

"The bong comes out, and I sit around in my underwear, eat TV dinners and watch Keith Olbermann," Mr. Cusick says. "It's almost like a vacation."

The break may be almost a vacation, but having the children gone isn't entirely a picnic. Parents report feeling lonely without their kids and anxious about how they're faring.

At the least, a deserted home requires a period of adjustment.

"You walk around lost for a couple of days," says Nancy Behrman, a single parent of two teenage daughters and owner of her own public relations firm.

Other parents, though, get used to the change in a hurry.

It's a good thing

"It's very quiet and a little eerie sometimes," says Carson Gleberman, a former consultant, referring to her Manhattan apartment. She and her husband have never before had all three children away. "I think about it for about 45 seconds," she adds, "and then it's like, 'Yes!' "

Some single parents find the break a good time to reconnect with the opposite sex. "I'm going through a divorce, and this will be my first summer alone, so to speak," says Ms. Behrman, who's looking forward to the "luxury of going to dinner parties and being open, perhaps, to dating."

Parents who have already been through a summer alone make the most elaborate use of the time.

Donna Speciale's son and daughter have both been away for the last four summers. The advertising executive and her husband now kick off the season with a weeklong bike trip, like the one they recently took in the San Juan Islands in the Pacific Northwest.

For the rest of the summer, they're happy to have no plans.

"We can go to the theater without waiting for the weekend," says Ms. Speciale, who is president of investment and activation at MediaVest. "Every day is a weekend."

Indeed, freed parents can find the most mundane events extraordinary.

"I came home last night at 8 o'clock and nobody was there," Mr. Lisser says with the hushed awe of someone describing sunset in the Himalayas. "I could relax. Usually, my day starts over at 8 o'clock."

STATS CAMP ROLL CALL

Number of sleepaway camps in the Northeast **599***

Number of children at those camps **260,000**

* American Camp Association accredited camps only. Northeast includes New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont.

Source: American Camp Association

TROUBLE SPOTS

FREEDOM FOR MOM AND DAD can be disorienting as well as liberating. Without the distraction of children, some couples find they have nothing to talk about.

"When you're raising children, it's easy **to fall out of touch** with each other," says Ingrid Schweiger, a therapist in Manhattan.

She recommends using the summer to re-energize the relationship or to seek professional help if that seems impossible. An unhealthy response would be for a couple to work longer hours and find ways to avoid each other.

The summer break is also good practice for **the real empty nest**.

"It's a very good exercise," says Alissa Sandler, a clinical social worker at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey. It teaches parents "they can have a life when the children leave home permanently," she adds.

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