

Parenting,

Being an older dad of two boys (Fionn 3 and Tomas 6) , myself brought up 5th of 6 children in rural Mayo its definitely a changed world when it comes to parenting. Brought up on a farm, my father often left at breakfast and came back as we were going to bed. Having six doubtless contributed, but spending free time with his kids after a hard days work didn't come naturally to him. Leaving the house coming back as adults we came to understand and appreciate him better as a person and relieved of the burden of raising us he also found us more enjoyable company. Perhaps because of this my experience of fatherhood has taken the opposite tack, trying to mine enjoyment from, and savor the early years of my children's lives as much as possible.

Having had children probably a decade after my peers, the additional child free years did not prepare me in any way for having or raising them. Instead, raising kids has often peeled the outer layers to reveal my inner child. Its sobering to realize that despite all the world knowledge accumulated there are a lot more ancient buttons and maladaptive responses that predominate in stressful situations. These downstairs brain responses were on full show during the first lockdown which was a slow-motion disaster for us along with many others. One of our boys is quite excitable and physical, and having him cooped up without his usual outlets was a significant stressor. A few weeks into lockdown 1.0 there was no plan that lasted more than a couple of days, very little imagination about how to entertain the kids or keep them apart and as it turned out, limited coping and conflict resolution skills. For me this meant that on certain days I could be an anxious and irritable disciplinarian constantly

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trying to impose a set of arbitrary rules and heaping unnecessary stress on everyone just in order to get some head space. In hindsight this probably was how my father felt some evenings coming home to 6 loud kids every day. It took a couple of months for it to sink in that nothing really worked until I essentially gave up the idea of being in control, gave in to their needs and gave over a large portion of the day to them freely and without resentment. Days when I could keep this insight front of mind and figure out how to implement it had more life affirming moments in them, the others were draining and being techy with the kids soured everything else. It happed and its over and thankfully lockdown 2.0 with the schools open is a relative breeze and as goes their happiness so does mine.

Covid has removed what social life I had and our two boys have taken root over all of what used to be my free time. This I give over willingly. Their appetites and needs are so pure and transparent at this age and their feedback is so immediate its incredibly rewarding when I feel like I've gotten it right. Those times when you don't there are no grudges held, forgiveness is swift and the chance to mend things again usually comes within minutes. Every day they invite us completely into their here and now which you tend to forget is the very best place to be. I'm conscious this is age related and may not last and I'm immensely grateful they are not at the age where they are beset with worries about more complex issues such as Covid or climate change etc. After a day of work that often doesn't offer one a sense of tangible progress or achievement we come home to the kids and are generally drawn to them as the most original and interesting people in the room. Like artists in residence the best thing we can do is give them a space to let them do their thing and be happy you can witness it.

One of my favorite pastimes with the kids and something I only was able to do with my own father really as an adult is the shared enjoyment of watching and discussing sports. I'm delighted they have inherited the ability to watch and be engrossed by almost any sport on a screen, irrespective of code or of era. For us piling onto the couch to watch Sat/Sunday GAA or Rugby or sometimes soccer is a wonderful shared experience. Here they get a chance to see me not just as their father but as an excitable Mayo fan ready to shout at the TV or thump the table and this feels like a good thing.

Overall I agree with those that tell us they are at a "great age" and that we should enjoy it which seems like good advice that every day I'm trying to take.