**All work and no play is not the best way to revise for exams**

**Douglas Henderson**

There is an old adage that if you want to get something done you should ask a busy person to do it. Not as paradoxical as it sounds. It accords with Parkinson’s Law (work expands to fill the time available for its completion). If you are busy, then you are fired up to do anything that needs doing and you are therefore likely to do it more effectively. On the other hand, if you have endless hours to do something, then you tend to waste many of those hours just filling them with probably useless activity, even just staring at the wall.

We are now in the midst of revision mania in schools and it seems to be mainly parents setting the agenda. Well-meaning as they manifestly are, they are doing their offspring a disservice if they ban them from doing anything but revise during the endless exam season. The best advice for anybody revising is that in any hour of work, they should take about five minutes off; every day they should spend two or three hours doing something completely different; and in any week they should have one whole day off. The something different preferably means a spot of fresh air and exercise. All this is to avoid what may be called brain fatigue, where your eyeballs are going round in circles with tedium.

There is no point in just staring at revision sheets and the like for hours on end. The best way to revise is through active revision rather than passive; that is, by giving out rather than taking in. If parents really want to be helpful, they should offer to help by testing their offspring on what they have just learned, not by shutting them up in their room until they go mad with boredom. They should then (according to the timetable above) encourage them to go out into the fresh air and take some exercise.

Only the other day, on BBC news there was an item about mental health in Universities, leading to suicides – notably in Bristol – and the solution was the obvious one: don’t spend all day every day fretting over swotting, but get out and do something physical. There was a large sign in one University library: Rest and Play.

One consequence of revision mania in recent years is that it is leading to the rapid death of cricket in schools. Our supposedly national summer sport is being killed by well-meaning but misguided parents refusing to let their children take part, even on a Saturday afternoon, leading to widespread cancellations of fixtures or at least the demand to play as short a game as possible.

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