



NEWS

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How to break winter boredom: Vacation week offers range of kids' activities

The day they've been waiting for has arrived. For thousands of children around the Mohawk Valley, school is out for the week.

The February break is a mixed blessing of sorts. It interrupts the monotony of an interminable winter, when kids trudge to school in the dark, state tests loom and the beckon of summer seems ages away. But for some young people, the week of respite is simply purgatory in the dreary days of February, when the restlessness and boredom of youth seem, well, even more boring than usual.

"I'm probably going to go to the mall every day with my friends because there's nothing to do in Utica," said Chris Cassetti, 16, a sophomore at Thomas R. Proctor High School in Utica. "I'm probably just going to sleep most of the time."

For parents who cringe to think of their young playing X-Box and consuming Doritos for nine days, alternatives are out there. The New Hartford Recreation Center plans special skating hours from 1 to 3 p.m. each weekday. City leaders will read about Jackie Robinson at Utica YMCA's read-in Friday at Utica Public Library from 9am-4pm.

The Children's Museum has events all week, including several about Mars. Kids of all ages wanting to escape Utica can help build a Mars rover Lego exhibit, watch space DVD's, find out what microbes are, view NASA exhibits, bring rocks in for NASA scientists comparison with Mars rocks, pick up a Pictorial Postal Commemorative NASA stamp, interact with a Jacob's Ladder & Science Toys from Princeton Lab, build a rocket or create a space bracelet, use the science room interactive computer programs, or experiment with weather room programs.

February break is the museum's busiest time in winter, Executive Director Marlene Brown said. "Almost everybody who comes in here is here for three or four hours," she said. "It's a far better and safer place than to have them at the mall."

Sometimes school breaks can lend themselves to sentiments more dangerous than boredom. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop," said Gary Harvey, community liaison with Utica schools. "Whenever there's time and nothing to do, kids will hang out on the corners or at the mall doing destructive things." Harvey's community theatre will hold rehearsals all week for an upcoming production for Black History Month.

What else can kids do? "Homework," said Utica Superintendent Daniel Lowengard, only half-joking. "Read a book," he ordered. Lowengard recommends recreational reading and outdoor activities to work off stress from school. Donovan Middle School ninth-grader Stephan Bell, 15, said he'll spend the week playing basketball, riding his bike, sleeping until noon -- and going to the mall. Most area students already have had at least three days off for bad weather since the December holidays. "We've had so many snow days and long weekends, it doesn't seem like a big deal anymore," Cassetti said. "It's time off from school, but it's also time to do nothing." Maybe by next Monday, he'll be itching to crack the books again.



By HEATHER AINSWORTH, Observer-Dispatch
Karis Dow, 5, right of Utica looks for fossils with a miniature magnifying glass Friday afternoon while her friend Bekkah Jo Benjamin, 4, looks on at the Paleontology Activity Center at the Children's Museum in Utica. The Children's Museum will offer a wide variety of winter break programs including interacting with a Jacob's Ladder science exhibit, Revolutionary War re-enactors and help build a Mars Rover Lego exhibit during winter school break.