

Breaks during term set children a bad example

SHELLEY HADFIELD, HERALD SUN, MAY 04, 2015 12:00AM



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WE all recognise that education comes in many forms and that learning does not just happen in the classroom.

Taking children on family holidays where they can experience different cultures can be an enriching experience. They can learn real-life skills and, for many, it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Not to mention the fact that family holidays are one of life's most precious memories.

But I think we are starting to lose sight of the importance of showing up at school every day, not just when it is convenient.

If you are on social media, you will probably have seen the response to recent crackdowns around the world on parents taking children out of school for holidays.

Online opinion has been largely in favour of the parents. Just last week, a Philadelphia-based father of two became an internet sensation for his response to a letter from his children's school pointing out that their trip during the school term was being noted as an unexcused absence.

Michael Rossi suggested his children had learnt as much during five days in Boston as they would in an entire year in school. The children missed three days of school, during which Mr Rossi said they saw him take part in the Boston marathon, as well as paying tribute to victims of the 2013 marathon bombings, walking The Freedom Trail, visiting the site of the Boston Tea Party and the Boston Massacre.

When I attended primary school in Melbourne's west in the 1980s, student absences for holidays were a rarity.

These days, however, pulling children out of school for family holidays has become widespread.

I don't blame parents for this phenomenon. I think that airlines and resorts which jack up their prices during school holiday periods and offer great savings during terms have a lot to answer for. There is also a whole group of parents who cannot take leave during the school holidays.

But schools across the state, which are expected to account for every student absence, are reminding parents about the importance of attending school every day. The bottom line is this — children already get 12 weeks off school every year. That's almost a quarter of the year.

Sure, theme parks are less busy during the school term and airfares are certainly cheaper, but shouldn't we endeavour, where possible, to take family holidays during those 12 free weeks?

There might be a lot to be gained from a once-in-a-lifetime overseas trip but, really, is there any educational benefit in a child skipping school to go to the Gold Coast? It is a view that runs against the tide of popular opinion. But last year, Dr Stephen Zubrick, from the University of Western Australia, released research that found even one day away from school can cause a drop in academic performance and 10 unauthorised absences in one year can lead to a child dropping almost a whole band in NAPLAN test results.

In Victoria, the average state primary student misses 14 days of school a year. In secondary school, that figure is 17 days.

Schools are being asked to teach our children about a growing list of topics. The curriculum is so crowded that some are covered only once a year. Absences can mean the child will not learn about a particular subject until the following year.

For children excelling at school, taking a holiday here and there is probably not going to do great harm. There are no shortage of parents who have posted online to say they took their child out of school for a wonderful holiday and then he or she went on to be top of their year. But what about the impact on those who struggle?

And it's not just about what the children miss out on academically. It's also about the value we place on education. Attending school every day is an important lesson. In life, we have commitments and have to be disciplined — we can't pack up and head off when we feel like it. School is no different.

It is also about social interaction. Will children be able to slot back into their friendships when they return?

Department of Education spokesman Stuart Teather said students needed to attend school every day.

"There is no safe number of days for missing school — each day a student misses puts them behind and can affect their educational outcomes," he said.

In Victoria, legislation came into effect last year allowing Department of Education school attendance officers to issue fines to parents whose children are absent without a reasonable

excuse for more than five days in a year and who refuse to work with the school to improve attendance.

Family holidays are deemed to be a reasonable excuse if prior approval has been gained from the school. But I think it's about time we started to think about this as a community. If we accept that children can miss school when it suits us, we need to stop complaining that Australia is sliding down the international rankings of academic performance.

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