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Why I Take My Kids Out of School to Travel

BY **JUDY KOUTSKY** | UPDATED FEBRUARY 28, 2020

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As a travel writer, I'm on the road quite a bit. Last year I took 22 trips and I brought one – or both – of my kids on 17 of them. Granted some trips were short – long weekends – but others, like Costa Rica and Panama, were ten days. I always try and plan my kids' trips during school and summer breaks, but it doesn't always work out that way. And for a vast majority of people, traveling only during school breaks is prohibitive cost-wise. Not to mention the crowds. So many parents, like me, pull their kids from school to travel.

Carla Marie Manly, PhD, clinical psychologist says: "As a clinical psychologist, parent, former teacher and former school counselor, I absolutely believe that there can be substantial benefits to pulling children out of school for travel. Since travel is more affordable – and thus more accessible – to families while school

is in session, parents are able to take children to places that couldn't afford otherwise. And, the quality of travel during less impacted times can also make the experience far more relaxing and powerful for both the parents and children. And, when families are relaxed, the overall travel experience can be far more positive.”

My kids have missed school to travel to Alaska – where they saw bears, whales, and went dog-sledding on glaciers. Then there was the meditation cruise in Mexico where my son practiced mindfulness each day while exploring the natural wonders of the Sea of Cortes. There was also a ski trip in Finland, where my son met and became friends with a lovely Estonia boy his age and together we all watched the Northern Lights dance across the sky at midnight.

If I had to limit my kids travel to just school breaks, they would have missed out on opportunities to see and experience cultures vastly different from what they know. But [is it okay to pull kids from school?](#) I obviously think so, but I asked experts on why they think missing school to travel isn't such a bad thing.

School can be stressful

“Today's learning environments are intense! Kids are expected to produce a lot of work very quickly and there is little downtime. The days of two recesses are long gone. And with that there has been a rise in stress, mental health issues, and problems with connecting socially,” says Pediatric Mental Health Expert and Psychologist [Dr. Roseann Capanna-Hodge](#). And she notes that it isn't just the kids that are stressed out, but parents too. “While teachers and principals may not think family travel should take priority over education, a trip might be just the thing a family needs to destress.”

It gives time to recharge and connect

We lead such busy lives that kids and parents need time to recharge and connect with each other and a vacation may be the only time to do it. “No matter what developmental stage they are in, family travel helps children to feel connected through the shared family experience. It gives families a shared love of something that they not only do together but can plan for and talk about,” says Dr. Capanna-Hodge.

My son and I will always remember the exhilaration of exploring caves in Belize and going on night safaris in the jungle to see tarantulas and scorpions.

And I’m not the only parent that feels that way. Montigus Jackson, a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and owner of [Starting Pointe Counseling Services](#) says: “I am a parent that recently took my children out of school to travel and it was very beneficial for them. I realize that like adults, children can get burnt out from school no matter the age and to take random trips not just when they are on assigned school breaks allows them to recharge.”

Not all learning happens in the classroom

“With the rise of ‘seatwork’, kids are writing and sitting a lot. There is virtually no time for creative free play, which means that thinking outside the lines isn’t valued anymore,” says Dr. Capanna-Hodge. “Vacations allow time for exploration and new learning.”

My favorite vacations with the boys are when we are active: kayaking in Alaska, snorkeling in Costa Rica, hiking in Finland, or fishing (and eating our catch) in Belize. My kids constantly talk about these trips and activities they embarked on, often for the first time.

Also, going on trips teaches kids valuable life skills. “Traveling teaches kids to be psychologically flexible, as travel often requires patience and creativity. Traveling mishaps like missed trains, language barriers, and lost luggage can be teachable moments for kids,” says Emmy Crouter, LSW, a psychotherapist practicing in Denver, Colorado. “Often travel can increase a child’s empathy for others and tolerance for difference, qualities which are skills one doesn’t always learn in a classroom.”



It can help kids who struggle in school

“I think if a child struggles academically, it is all the more reason to expose them to travel,” says [Dr. Nicole Avena](#), Assistant Professor of Neuroscience, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, Visiting Professor of Health Psychology, Princeton University. “I think from a mental health perspective it is a good idea to give kids

who struggle academically a break from the focus on academics. Academics are important, but being emotionally intelligent is a better predictor of success in life. Learning about new places and people helps with empathy.”

Also, every child learns differently and thus needs different learning opportunities to shine. “School can be even harder and more stressful for a child with a learning, attentional, behavioral, or social difficulty. These kids have to work double as hard as kids without the same challenges. Just like when we work hard, kids crave breaks,” says Dr. Capanna-Hodge.

“Sitting in a classroom when reading or learning isn’t the best way to stimulate our extraordinary learners. Touching, feeling, and experiencing is the best way kinesthetic learners take in information and that is what travel is all about. Through travel experiences, kids with learning challenges can gain deeper knowledge and skills in a way they may have not been able to within a classroom, which installs confidence and self-esteem.”

Also, learning-by-doing is one of the best ways for education to sink in.

“Neurobiologically, that which we experience in person – the sights, smells, sounds, and interactions – can be far more memorable than that which is learned in one dimension (like through a textbook). For example, if children are learning about France in a geography class, the learning is often a combination of textbook reading, writing, and listening to the teacher. Yet, a trip to France can make the geography, history, and culture come to life in the child's eyes,” says Dr. Manly.

It’s can be especially helpful for Kids with ADHD

With the rise in kids diagnosed with ADHD, travel might be just the right kind of learning for them. “Children who have difficulty learning or have conditions such

as ADHD often thrive in settings that allow for varied experiences that increase attention span and absorption of the educational environment,” says Dr. Manly. “And, when a child does not feel labeled as being the rule breaker or inattentive kid, they are able to enjoy the learning experiences free of other's judgments and negative expectations. And, such experiences often have a powerful effect on the child's level of self-esteem.”



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It's a field trip – only longer

Think back to your own school years. Often, we may not remember the day-to-day studies but we remember the field trips – those out of ordinary experiences

that were fun as well as educational. “Parents who pull children out of school for travel are not necessarily robbing a child of education because even these excursions are learning opportunities. A simple beach vacation can be a tremendous opportunity to talk about conservation, ecology, sea life, and the effects of global warming. When parents use the travel environment as a natural platform for education, the learning opportunities can far exceed those that are present in the confines of a classroom. That's why we take school field trips with children,” explains Dr. Manly.

It can enrich the lives of other students

“These absences can be dealt with successfully when parents partner with the teachers, and when conversations are handled in a manner in which no one thing – the classroom or the travel – are seen as better or worse than the other,” says Deborah J. Cohan, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of South Carolina Beaufort. “When people have these conversations in ways that minimize or eliminate arrogance, then ideas can emerge regarding how the traveling student might bring back ideas and insights from the experience that enrich the lives of the students who did not make that same trip.”

Be prepared for judgement from others

“You are the CEO of your family and ultimately it is up to you to decide what is best for your kids,” says Dr. Capanna-Hodge. “When parents or teachers disagree with you, you don't have to explain or defend your decision if you are within the bounds of the school absence policy. On the other hand, if you feel like you want to share why you believe travel is educational, stress relieving, and all around beneficial, go for it.”

If you pull your kids out of school for travel, be prepared to be judged – especially by other parents. I was told by one person that she would never pull her child from school because she values education. I explained that I valued education as well, I just don't believe that all learning is done in the classroom.

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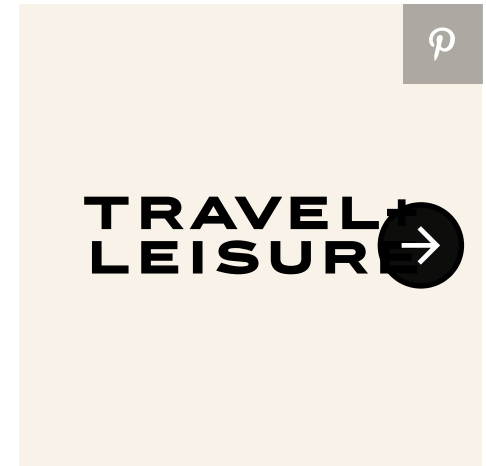
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