

By Sin Heng Luh

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## Commentary: No time to be a family – except on vacation

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As family time gets squeezed by the demands of work, school and technological distractions, carving out space to spend quality family time together instead of taking an expensive vacation might do your relationship wonders, says National University of Singapore's Sin Heng Luh.



Many have argued that the intense time spent together as a family during vacations allow parents and children to get to know each other on a deeper level. (Photo: AFP/Ed Jones)

SINGAPORE: It is that time of the year again, where the morning commute to work is a little less crowded and a little more peaceful. The year-end holidays and festivities are just around the corner, and many, especially those with school-going children, are taking off for family vacations.

While vacations come at a cost and are surely a privilege that is more affordable for those with higher incomes, rest and leisure is a human right, and research has suggested that family vacations play vital roles in family bonding and the creation of shared memories.

Studying what is called "family capital", researchers have suggested that family vacations are highly effective in building "bonds between parents and children that are useful in promoting child socialisation".

### VACATION – A MODERN FAMILY NECESSITY

Much like the oft-quoted saying that a family that eats together stays together, many have argued that the intense time spent together as a family during vacations allow parents and children to get to know each other on a deeper level, and hence build and stabilise family relationships.

Indeed, a colleague went on a two-week trip, just his daughter and him, and came back schooled in every little detail of the child's likes and dislikes. Further, he observed how much his daughter had blossomed under his guidance and undivided attention.

Modern families increasingly invest significant time and money in travel as a leisure activity.

As detailed in the latest household expenditure survey in 2013, the median household in Singapore spent S\$2,280 per year on vacations (4 per cent of total household expenditure), and this increases significantly as income levels go up. The top 20 per cent of all households spent an average of S\$7,560 per year on vacations (8 per cent of total household expenditure).

As incomes rise over the past few decades, vacations are increasingly seen as an essential rather than a luxury.

The image of the happy family on holiday is ever-present in tourism marketing and all over your social media feeds, even if they spend the other 50 weeks of the year at each other's throats or on their phones.



Modern families increasingly invest significant time and money in travel as a leisure activity. (File Photo: REUTERS/Erik De Castro)

And in this season especially – Facebook and Instagram are flooded with pictures of smiling children against a backdrop of the sun, sand and sea. All having the time of their lives away from schoolwork, assessment books and tuition classes.

Therein may lie the reason why vacations seem so important to the modern family.

#### PROTECTED TIME FROM WORK AND SCHOOL

The age-old desire to achieve work-life balance features strongly here. Beyond simply being a means to take a break from the daily hustle, family vacations also represent a rare opportunity to have protected time that parents can spend with their children – away from work and school commitments that often encroach into workday evenings and weekends.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, author of *The Time Bind*, has argued that as the Internet and mobile devices allow individuals to work more easily from home, the borders between family and work have become increasingly permeable.

People are not only staying later at work, but have also inevitably invited work into almost every waking hour. Remember waking up to work-related messages before breakfast with the family yesterday, or taking a pause while building blocks with your child because you glanced at your smartphone and saw an urgent work email (and having that pause grow into an hour away)?



Family vacations also represent a rare opportunity to have protected time that parents can spend with their children away from work and school commitments. (Photo: Sherlyn Goh)

Why would we do that at the expense of quality time with our families?

Hochschild suggests that "work was offering stimulation, guidance, and a sense of belonging, while home had become the place in which there was too much to do in too little time".

And perhaps it isn't only parents doing this. In Singapore at least, children's schedules are increasingly filled up with enrichment classes and tuition.

For better or for worse, the booming enrichment market in Singapore has meant that many families spend their weekends shuttling from one class to another.

The family vacation then becomes one of the few opportunities in a year where Daddy or Mummy can't "rush back to work", and children aren't forced to practise violin or go for swimming classes. In fact, perhaps it has become such that it is only when on vacation that a family has the time to be a family.

Does that mean that only the rich who can afford family vacations deserve such protected family time?

#### WHAT QUALITY TIME REALLY IS

Of course not. Good news – research has found that quality time for a child is in fact rather simple and is literally nothing special.

While early childhood businesses and the entertainment industry would like to convince you that you have to shell out for quality time, Tamar Kremer-Sadlik, a professor of anthropology at UCLA, notes that "everyday activities (like household chores or running errands) may afford families quality moments, unplanned, unstructured instances of social interaction that serve the important relationship-building functions that parents seek from quality time".



Relationship-building doesn't require fancy or expensive overseas holidays, just quality time. (File photo: Ngau Kai Yan)

Indeed, children were observed to value such regular moments more than elaborate and "fun" activities planned especially for them.

Parents of young children should know this all too well – you endure a draining flight to Phuket or Bali only to find that your child decides that he simply hates sand and would not deign to stand on it barefoot, let alone build sandcastles. Or you can go all the way to the Grand Canyon and your child is only interested in jumping in puddles of mud, plainly ignoring nature's grandiose splendour.

Thankfully, you don't have to bring your children to Switzerland or Disney World for a vacation, or even to the Zoo or Universal Studios while on staycations.

The best family bonding time is not about the most expensive destinations or photogenic activities, but simply time spent doing mundane, seemingly irrelevant and unexciting things together.

Hanging out by the pool, having a prata supper, or just having the whole family squeeze into one bed at night – apparently these are what quality time is really made of.

In fact, if you resist the urge or need to work or send the kids to classes, or if employers would stop expecting work to be done beyond office hours, perhaps you don't even need to go on vacations. Carving out 20 minutes where mobile phones are muted to listen about each other's day could go a long way.

Indeed, looking at family tourism often gives us an insight into life beyond the vacation. It is a mirror of everyday family life, and reflects what we lack or desire.

The problem here then is with the larger issue of the modern working life and its lack of family-work balance.

Until we manage to create a society where family time is valued and honoured above or at least on par with other needs however, the home away from home during our travels seems to remain unfortunately as one of the few occasions we can have protected time to be just a family.

Sin Heng Luh is assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's Department of Geography. Her research focuses on tourism and tourism's practices within the boundaries of sustainable development and ethical consumerism.