

am i ruining my kid?

School Versus Vacation

How many days of school can you miss before it's not OK?

FILED UNDER: [school](#), [vacation](#)



Photograph by Veer

BY AMBER NASRULLA

When I was 15, my family took a two-month trip to Pakistan. We left on New Year's Eve and returned at the end of February. I missed a ton of school. Why did we go for so long? (And did I flunk?)

Well, airfare for a family of five was a small fortune, so a one-week stay didn't make sense. The flight to Karachi was more than 19 hours; jet lag was brutal; there were friends and relatives to meet, and historic sites to visit. I took my reading list, science and math textbooks (and asked my father, a physician, to untangle algebra for me). It was a challenge to find time

to study, and often I neglected it to hang out with my bilingual cousins; however, in their company I became fluent in Urdu (Pakistan's official language).

I had a lot of catching up to do when we returned, which meant no mall trips or movies on weekends with friends. I hunkered down and scored B's and A's in my final term in grade 10. My parents and I don't regret the decision to miss school because I forged bonds with relatives and fell in love with my ancestral culture.

Someday, I may take my 5-year-old son to my parents' homeland, and it will likely be in January (when the weather is coolest). So, he will miss school. In anticipation, I consulted experts for ways in which kids can learn on the road.

Their advice? Prepare. Check the school's attendance policy, as these can vary by state, and public school district (private schools have their own policies). In California, for instance, a child needs to be present for a minimum of 75 percent of the school year to officially complete a grade. And when children have 10 "unexcused absences" in a row, parents must re-enroll them.

There are three kinds of absences: unexcused (vacation), excused (illness with a doctor's note; death in the family) and truancy (child doesn't show up and parent is unaware). When a child has 10 unexcused absences the school gives him an "attendance contract." After that, he must have a doctor's note for any missed days. In California, if a child doesn't have a doctor's note, the parents meet with school counselors, teachers and the principal, and that's followed by meetings with the School Attendance Review Board. If the absences continue, an officer from the District Attorney's office steps in to deal with chronic truancy. Nobody wants to go down that road. All you (and I) want is a learning holiday, right?

Don't expect a customized education plan; instead, ask what your children will miss and what you can do to keep them current.

So, resist the urge to turn days off into weeks off. If you absolutely must have a longer vacation, build it around the school's existing holiday schedule. Your child could leave a couple of days before school closes and return a couple of days after school opens (instead of missing 10 full academic days).

And talk to teachers early when you've booked tickets. Don't expect a customized education plan; instead, ask what your children will miss and what you can do to keep them current. Understand that teachers aren't required to hand over homework in advance. And when they do hand over some assignments, don't be tempted to take advantage of their flexibility, year after year. For instance, don't book a vacation during parent-teacher conferences with the expectation that the teachers will carve out a special 30-minute appointment afterward to discuss your child's development.

Holly Prince, a 5th grade language arts teacher in Los Angeles, points out that teachers have the year's lesson plans laid out in September and know what they'll be teaching from week to week, but the pacing might change and specifics might not be hammered out until the Friday before. "You can't replace the classroom experience no matter what [homework] you give them," she says. "You can't teach kids if they're not there."

Some children are flexible and will transition easily back into the classroom, while others will struggle, says [Betsy Brown Braun](#), a child development and behavior specialist in Los Angeles and bestselling author of *Just Tell me What to Say* and *You're Not the Boss of Me*. She suggests high school students stay put because they have a specific curriculum to master in order to gain entry into college.

Children can infer messages about the importance of school and following through on commitments, even when parents haven't said a thing. She cites families who take multiple ski vacations during school: "I don't want to be judgmental, but I don't like the message that skiing is more important than school. Or that doing homework while on holiday is more important than doing it in school, with a professional teacher, in the context of cooperative learning with other children."

Look for learning opportunities in any location—from a weekend at a cabin, to an annual family cruise, to volunteering at a Kenyan orphanage.

But she adds, "There is no greater teacher than experience and going somewhere with your family, whether that's Thailand for six months or Puerto Rico for six weeks, that's an incredibly enriching, expansive experience." When children experience new cultures, languages and landscapes, they can gain confidence, independence and perspective.

[Charlotte Reznick](#), a children's education psychologist and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*, urges parents to look for learning opportunities in any location—from a weekend at a cabin, to an annual family cruise, to volunteering at a Kenyan orphanage. Encourage your children to become archivists, tell them to keep journals and help them to tap into their imaginations, she says.

"If you're on a ski holiday, see it as a creative writing opportunity and write an essay from the point of view of a deer. What's it like to be living up in Yosemite or Alaska?" she says. "Buy the papers in the country you're in and translate the language. Depending on the child's age, you can do a lot. You can get into science and social studies." True, but they still have to complete their studies to advance to the next grade (which means it's probably best for my son to complete school and for us to travel to Pakistan in the sweltering summer months).

Overall, remember that teachers and parents are on the same team. "We want kids to thrive," Prince says.