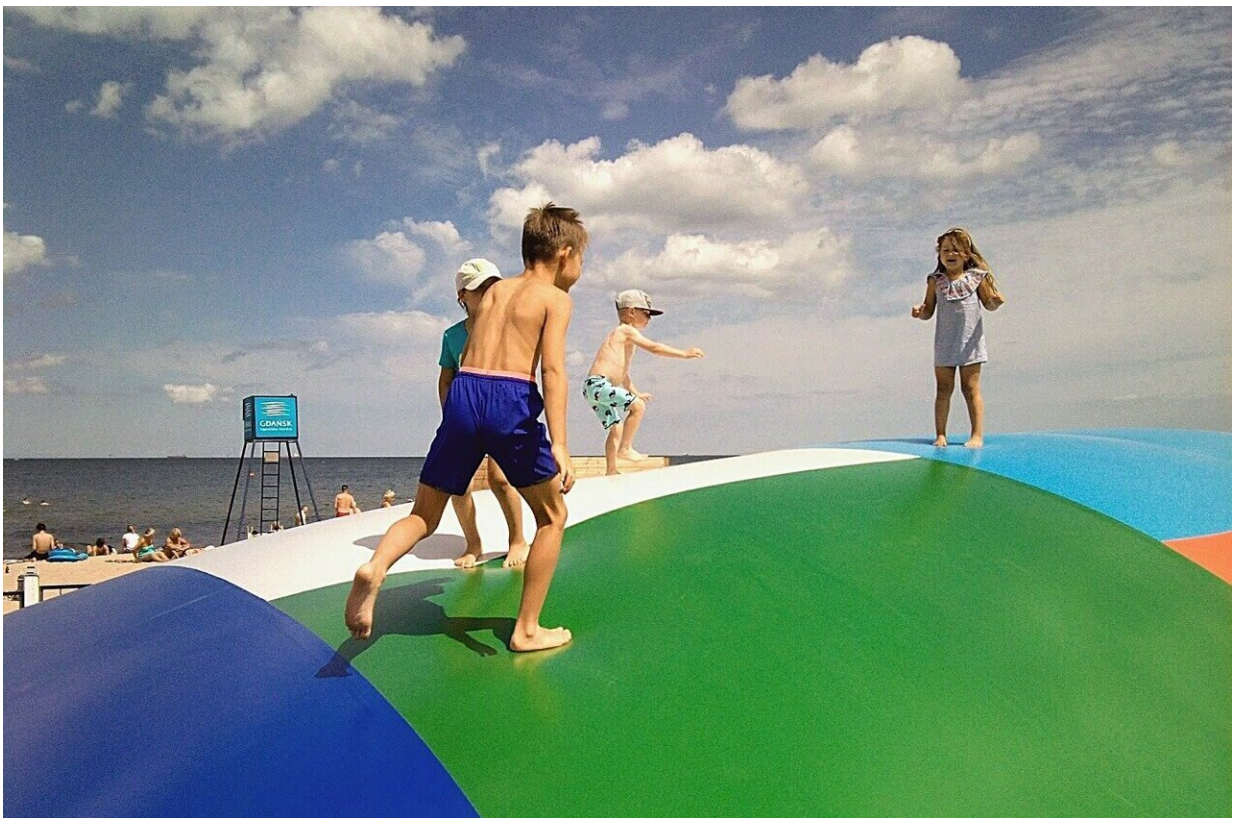


Why term-time holidays can be a lifeline for children and young people with attachment needs

November 7 2023, by Sarah Wall



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The holidays are over, and children are back in school—apart from the ones going on a term-time vacation.

The combination of the cost of living crisis and the fact that holidays can be [significantly cheaper in term time](#) makes taking children out of school for a [holiday](#) tempting for parents and caregivers. It has been reported that unauthorized holidays in term time accounted for over five million [lost school days](#) in England in the 2021-22 academic year.

Headteachers in England cannot grant term-time holiday requests unless there are "[exceptional circumstances](#)." If a headteacher declines a holiday request and parents or caregivers take their child out of school anyway, they can be fined £60. This fine rises to £120 if they do not pay within 21 days, or to potential prosecution if they do not pay within 28 days.

But for some children and [young people](#), there is more to the debate than a cheap holiday and some late summer sunshine. Some need extra time to build secure relationships with the important adults in their lives, and the quality time that a holiday provides can be invaluable.

Attachment theory

[My research](#) is underpinned by [attachment theory](#), which suggests that key adults should be available and responsive to a child's needs. In such a [relationship](#), the child knows that if they are distressed, they can rely on their caregiver to help them feel better.

With consistent "[good enough](#)" parenting like this, children will develop a [secure base](#) from which to explore the world.

A securely attached child [actively monitors](#) their caregivers' location while exploring, only returning if faced with a challenging situation. The secure base gives children the ability to navigate the world and, as they become more independent, they can spend longer periods of time away from the important adults in their lives.

But estimates suggest that [40% of all children](#) have insecure attachments. This can happen when [traumatic events](#) affect how available and responsive important adults are to these children—and this can affect the development of secure relationships.

These [adverse childhood experiences](#) can include bereavement, hospitalization, living in a war zone, sexual and [physical abuse](#) (such as domestic violence) and neglect.

Insecurely attached children respond to challenging situations with [hyper-vigilance](#)—they are constantly on alert for threats. This means that for many pupils, school is fraught with challenge.

Pupils have to manage extended periods away from parents or caregivers, and navigate relationships with peers and unfamiliar adults. They have to keep their emotions in check, even when they feel overwhelmed.

They are required to be increasingly independent. To make and carry out decisions alone. To answer for the consequences of their actions. And to know that a chosen behavior is practicable, [sociable, and moral](#).

This is despite the fact that many of these children still need to [develop dependency](#)—where others meet their psychological, social and physical needs—first. On top of all this come academic expectations.

But holidays can increase the amount of time that a child spends with their parents or caregivers, giving them the space they need to develop these important relationships.

Building bonds

Research suggests that family holidays make children [happier and](#)

[smarter](#). On holiday, families can create [shared, positive memories](#) that children can draw upon for years to come. Time [away from routine](#) allows parents and caregivers to truly attend to their child's needs in a fun, playful, and focused way.

Having more time with parents or caregivers, and moving slowly towards these more secure relationships, can help reduce children's anxiety and hyper-vigilance, and improve their overall mental health.

At pertinent times, then, which may not fit within the existing school holiday structure, children with attachment needs may benefit from extended periods with birth or adoptive parents, or foster caregivers. It takes [quality time](#) to build relationships, away from commitments such as work and school, and this is what [holidays](#) can offer such families.

Dedicating time to building these bonds can serve children well when they are back in school. When children become anxious, [school](#) staff can draw on these stronger relationships. A [phone call](#) or note from home can help reassure them, for instance.

Holidays give families precious time together—and a term-time holiday should be a matter of what is best for a child and their family.

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