

Crazed descent into holiday hell

By Ruth Ostrow

"MY workload is bigger than yours," I scream across the room, holding up a pile of work notes and books the way a stud would hold out his wedding tackle.

"Mine is far bigger than yours! I've got a deadline next week, and a paper due in, and a conference to attend, and I've got to fly to Sydney, and..." It's that time again -- it rolls around every few months -- the battle of the parents. Children are at home more than at school nowadays. What used to be about 10 weeks' holiday a year -- set over three terms -- in my day can now be up to 15 weeks, by my calculation. Which means more traffic jams and queues everywhere, more absenteeism from work, more dangerous roads for all of us, more noise.

And for parents who work, it's a seething hotbed of accusations and desperation as both parties make a plea for time to do their job. And it's hard to see who is the real eight-year-old in it: "It's your turn to be the taxi driver, you pooh-pooh, bum-bum head!" Of course, the fighting only relates to evolved couples who don't dump child-rearing on the woman alone. With so many women now working in full-time careers, you have to really wonder about a system that derails us by giving us our children to occupy more often, in the middle of our normal day-to-day lives.

And what are we to do with them? With their shorter attention spans, it's hard to get children reading or playing an instrument for very long. We're supposed to spend the money we slavishly earn on rampant consumerism.

More videos. More Hollywood blockbusters. More trips to Movie World. Because I live close to the Gold Coast, we've done every world in the world, umpteen times: Sea World, Snow World, Dream World. What do parents who don't live near the worlds do?

There are no more worlds to go to. Except perhaps an UnderWorld where frazzled parents hold their children's hands as they descend into the realms of Dante's *Inferno*, with fire-breathing monsters and Hieronymous Bosch-style creatures poking hot prods into you.

"Hey Mum, can we be tortured by standing in that queue for an hour in the boiling heat while other kids throw food at us and bicker?" "Hey Dad, can we torment you by dangling upside down on those dangerous rides, screaming, vomiting, then eating lots of junk food at the *Inferno* canteen so we can get free Finding Nemo plastic dooverlackies? And you can fight with Mum all the way home, while I bash up my brother? Pleeeeeze!" "Hey Mum, let's experience the ultimate horror -- the Hell Realm Movie Theatre, where kids climb over you and crackle plastic wrappers, and your nostrils fill with the nauseating smell of popcorn, and your seat is kicked mercilessly by kids who are hyperactive from eating too much fairy floss. And you can't hear the dialogue over the screaming of newborn infants and desperate mothers who yell: `Stop it, give your sister the ice-cream -- I said stop hitting your brother. Sit down, sit down, sit down NOW!' Pleeeeeze?" I often send my daughter to holiday care. They take her to more worlds unseen, and to Abrakidazzle, which is a sort of giant playground on the Gold Coast, and Macadamia Castle, which is an excellent world of baby animals, and to skating parks. But out-of-school care costs a fortune. Up to \$50 a day with excursions. As a working parent, you are damned if you do and damned if you

don't, and it's all guilt, guilt, guilt. I feel like a rotten, selfish co-parent, a rotten employee, and best of all, a rotten, rotten mother whose child deserves better.

I can send her to friends who have farms, and she comes home with healthy, pink cheeks. But they are all a long drive away, and you do have to reciprocate by having little Johnny or Violet in the middle of your lounge room screaming in high-pitched tones a few days later, while trying to deal with your editor on the phone. Guilt, guilt, guilt.

I'm actually one of the lucky ones. I have one well-behaved little girl and a brilliant partner who also works from home, and who never puts his career needs before mine. Yet still I'm overwhelmed. So I'm writing this for all the other parents, particularly working women and those who have more than one child, and those who are forced to spend money on holidays they can't afford, only to feel guilty, guilty, guilty for even closing one eyelid by the pool because so many children drown each year.

I want my child to be at school learning, and having intellectual nourishment. I want to enjoy my time with her. Christmas holidays are just around the corner. Six weeks of it.

God help us for having a system that makes us resent spending time with our children because it doesn't take into account the realities of modern life. To the architects of all this, I say: You are all pooh-pooh, bum-bum heads.

www.ruthostrow.com

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 18 OCT 2003