

Days of Precious guilt

By Ruth Ostrow

School holidays have been wonderful this time around. Not. I got to spend endless hours feeling guilty about neglecting my daughter as I tried to do the work required to pay for the very schooling she wasn't having. Huh?

Has anyone else noticed that our children are home more than they are at school nowadays? Holidays that come about every few weeks, terms cut short in their prime, summer holidays that never end, and those dreaded "pupil-free" days. Sorry? Did someone say "pupil-free" days or is this a bad dream?

I'm a walking guilt-bag, a human pretzel tied in emotional knots. Talk about Catch-22. Leaving Precious in front of the electronic babysitter so I can slave away to make some money for the next school holidays so we can go somewhere nice rather than sit in front of the electronic babysitter, bartering with co-parent: "Just because you're the man doesn't mean your work is more important than mine!"

The system is not working. With many families having two working parents due to economic realities, divorce, etcetera, with industrial relations reforms about to make it even harder for parents to scoot off to MovieWorld, why on Earth is the school year getting shorter and shorter? Christmas, Easter, term one break, term two break, term three break, public holidays, Christmas again, pupil-free days ...

No, I am not imagining it. I rang the education department. What used to be ten weeks' holiday a year set over three terms can now be up to 15 weeks in some schools. Meanwhile, parents' holidays are shrinking to between two and four. The result: hordes of loitering tweenagers clogging our roads and stuffing themselves with fast food.

Even stay-at-home parents are plum out of ideas. The ones I know are as desperate as I am. Time-rich often means cash-poor, specially on one income – and it costs big money to occupy those simple minds.

Either our kids need to be at school more, or else the government has to set up nationwide Guilty Rotten Parent support groups where we can share our anxieties about sending kids to play in the traffic. Where men and women can slog it out over gender imbalance, and then share the names of good kiddy video games. How about government supplied Super Nannies? Or the introduction of 15 weeks' paid holiday leave a year as part of new workplace reforms? Ahhhh, Johnnie, now that would get the unions on side.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian Magazine August 13, 2005