

How was your summer?

A survey of professionals on what summer was like for the children and families they support

Executive Summary

The summer holidays are traditionally thought of as a time for fun, exploring new places and spending time with family and friends.

Yet for many children, the summer holidays are a time of increased challenges with few opportunities for fun, leaving them less able to thrive when they go back to school.

The Family Holiday Association is the leading national charity providing breaks and days out for families struggling with some of the toughest challenges life can bring.

We surveyed our network of support professionals (such as social workers, teachers and support workers) to find out what summer holidays are like for the children and families they work with.

The results show that:

- **99%** of support professionals work with children and families who did not have a holiday this summer with almost a quarter seeing no families get away at all
- Many children did not even have a day out this summer with **77%** of support professionals reporting that only a few families left their local area
- **99%** of support professionals know children who did not visit a local park
- Mental health deteriorates for parents over the summer with **80%** of support professionals reporting that parental mental health gets worse due to the stress of trying to entertain or even feed children whilst on a low income. Lack of routine also impacts mental health. These factors are exacerbated by the length of the break
- **90%** of support professionals know children who went hungry over the summer due to lack of school meals
- Children are less able to perform when they go back to school due to a lack of opportunities over the summer break. **74%** of professionals we surveyed thought that the long summer break adversely affected children. A sense of shame and embarrassment at having no stories to share is a key factor in not being able to settle into the new term.

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Methodology

We sent an online questionnaire to 5,190 support professionals (across 97% of UK local authority areas) who had registered with the Family Holiday Association since December 2017.

We wanted to get a better understanding of what the summer holidays are like for families they support so we asked them to consider all of the families they work with in their responses and not just those they had referred to us.

We asked a range of closed questions that looked at what families did together over the summer holidays, the particular challenges that summer holidays might present and the impact of these on children and parents.

We also asked some open ended questions on particular issues and have included some quotes to help illustrate the points raised in the statistics.

We received responses from 481 support professionals based in 378 organisations.

We received responses from support professionals working in the following type of organisations:

Type of organisation / dept.	Number of responses	Type of organisation / dept.	Number of responses
Family support charity	82	Women's refuge	9
Housing association	17	Other charity	62
NHS	7	Other type of local authority dept.	103
School / education	60	Other type of organisation	31
Social work	110		

We received responses from the following parts of the country:

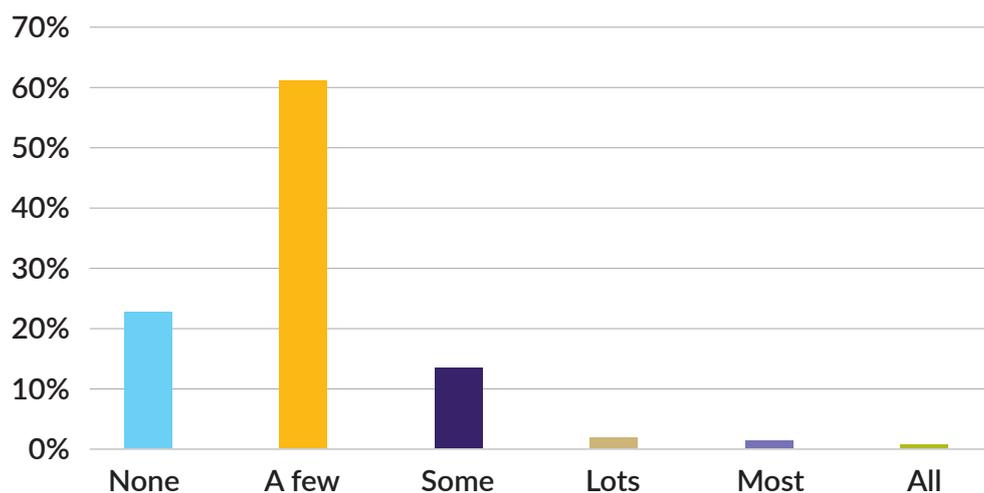
Part of the UK	Number of responses	Part of the UK	Number of responses
East Midlands	10	Scotland	69
East of England	13	South East	49
London	69	South West	56
North East	20	Wales	30
North West	55	West Midlands	49
Northern Ireland	4	Yorkshire and Humber	57

Children missing out on holidays and days out

99% of support professionals work with children / families who did not have a holiday¹ this summer.

Almost one quarter of support professionals did not see any families they work with get a holiday this summer².

How many families / children had a holiday this summer



73% of support professionals felt that the number of families unable to afford a summer holiday had increased over the past 3 years.

But it's not just holidays that children are missing out on, we also asked about typical days out that children and families might take part in over the summer.

Every support professional who responded reported that they work with families who didn't have a day out this summer to the seaside, country park or nearby town. 77% reported that only a few families had a day trip outside their local area.

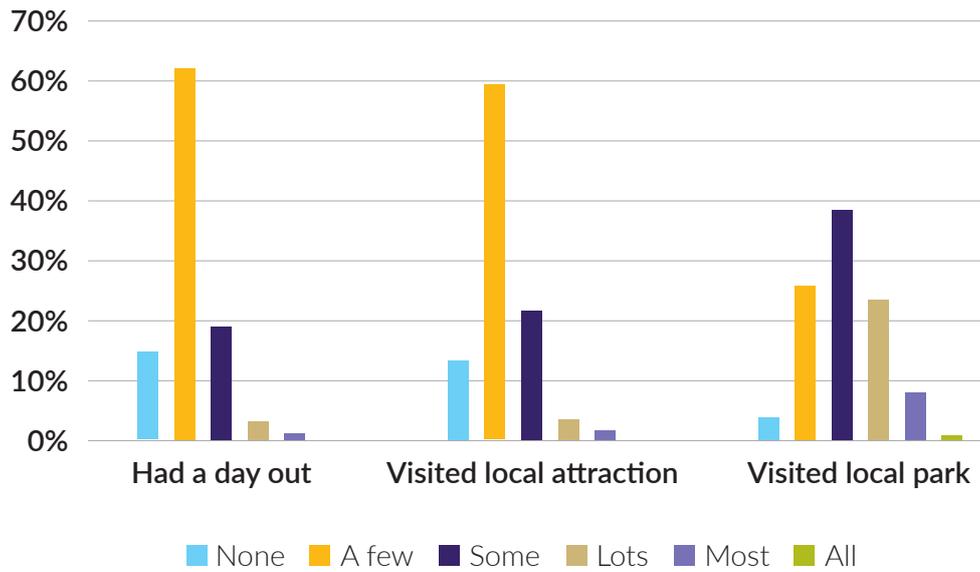
Visiting a local tourist attraction is also something that many families did not experience this summer, with 98% of support professionals reporting most of the families they support did not experience this.

1 (2+ night stay somewhere)

2 A few=less than 25%; Some=26-50%; Most=51-75%; Lots=76-99%

99% of support professionals work with families who didn't even go to the local park over the summer, whilst there may be some families who do not have a park in their local area, this surely speaks of children with very limited opportunities.

How many children supported by professionals experienced these things this summer



Challenges of summer

“Many of the boys at school actively become more challenging as school holidays approach as they anticipate that life is going to become difficult for them.”

What our research shows is that a lack of holidays and days out over the summer has a number of impacts on children and parents. Mental health can deteriorate and children are exposed to more danger and harm. Many parents also struggle to feed their children over the long summer break.

Parental mental health over the summer holidays

Recent research by Nottingham Civic Exchange on the value of breaks for Ordinary Working Families³, showed that when families are not able to take a break it adversely affects mental wellbeing.

Our survey indicates how widespread the issue of poor mental wellbeing is, with 98% of support professionals working with families facing mental health issues.

80% of support professionals think that for the families they support, mental health gets worse for parents over the summer.

Length of the break

The length of the summer holiday is a key factor impacting on mental health according to many support professionals, compounding a range of challenges that families face.

“Families state it is stressful having the children home for 6 weeks...it’s too long with not enough to do and lack of money to take them out.”

“Parents struggle to cope with looking after several children for the lengthy holiday and with no disposable income can’t afford transport or activity costs and have to access food banks due to the added costs of food needed for lunches etc. children become bored, parents become stressed worsening already poor mental health.”

“The 5/6 weeks are long, most of the times the parents get a break during school term where they can deal with issues that affect their lives. But during holidays having to find childcare, trying to make the appointments and providing meals for their families is harder as most centres cut their hours during this time.”

³ www.ntu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/826102/Value-of-Breaks-for-Ordinary-Working-Families-research-report.pdf

Lack of routine

For some parents with mental health issues, the routine of school gives a ‘reason to get up in the morning’. Not having this structure to the day can create knock on effects for the whole family.

“Parents who struggle to get out due to depression or anxiety go out even less because they don’t have to go out everyday to take the children to school.”

“I think that the lack of routine and the length of the summer break does impact on both the parents and the child’s mental health. Parents get stressed about keeping the children occupied and maybe not being able to afford to do anything with their children.”

“Parents with MH (mental health issues) can disengage and isolate themselves as they do not have to do the daily school run, this has a negative impact on the children as they then become isolated and do not always have the opportunity to enjoy days out or leisure time that other children access.”

Financial struggles

The pressure of keeping children occupied when money is tight is a real struggle for many parents.

“We see parents struggling more and telling us that their mental health is worse - they feel guilty about not doing more, get more depressed, then it becomes a vicious circle as they stay in bed and their kids miss out more etc.”

“Families feel guilty not able to take children on holiday, everybody stuck in the house together.”

“The summer holidays can bring extra stress for families who are already struggling. Financial and emotional strains for parents of not meeting the expectations of what an “expected” summer should be like.”

“The financial struggle is immense not only to entertain the children but also to feed them. Parents struggle and argue over lack of money to take the children anywhere.”

Child mental health

As well as parents feeling the strain over the summer, 64% of support professionals think that child mental health can get worse over the summer.

Summer can be a particularly isolating time for children with many reporting that this is a key factor impacting child mental health over the summer.

“A majority of children face loneliness and isolation during the holidays, particularly those enduring bullying or living in deprivation.”

“Our young carers are even less able to have respite from their caring role and our parents all experience some kind of health problem or there is a sibling who has a health problem. They aren’t able to take the young person out and about and feeling trapped at home can become exacerbated.”

“Can be more isolated when not attending school. Some families live in small rural villages and cannot afford to travel far or their mental health prevents them going out very much.”

“This can be a very lonely time for children, school is sometimes the only place children are able to socialise and spend time with peers.”

Conversely summer holidays are still a time of respite and recovery for children experiencing bullying or antisocial behaviour at school, with 18% of support professionals reporting that child mental health improves over the summer.

“A lot of the children we support struggle at school, so summer holidays can be a welcome break from this, but those who have a difficult home life can be negatively affected.”

“Those who are struggling with school for a variety of reasons often find the break positive.”

“Children become more relaxed without the pressures of school.”

Other challenges of summer

Summer is also a time when children have a greater chance of experiencing harmful and potentially damaging situations.

We asked support professionals about some issues that children they support might be exposed to and whether or not they saw an increase in exposure over the summer holidays.

Issue children exposed to	Professionals working with children exposed to this?	How many see an increase in this over the summer
Alcohol	90%	65%
Antisocial behaviour	87%	70%
Domestic abuse	92%	55%
Drugs	87%	58%
Isolation	97%	77%
Knife crime	50%	52%

“If the home has issues with domestic violence, alcohol/ drugs, mental health issues this can be exacerbated when they are all together all day every day with no way of having fun.”

“Lots of children find that during the summer holidays, they spend the majority of time in the house with their parents. This is sometimes because parents don’t have funds to take them out, or there are other issues impacting on parents such as drug, alcohol or their own mental health. I have seen fewer summer activities available for children and young people in North Manchester this year.”

“Most of the families I support dread the school holidays and it has shown that this period of time is when children become involved in anti-social behaviour, crime and drug and alcohol use more heavily due to boredom.”

“School holidays, especially the summer holidays fill me with an uneasiness as we never know the full extent of how some of our pupils suffer.”

Holiday hunger

“I know there are some who go back having lost weight as they have skipped meals.”

We are not the first organisation to highlight the problem of ‘holiday hunger’, with children not getting enough to eat over the summer without access to school meals⁴. Our survey shows the extent of this problem, with 90% of support professionals seeing children struggle to get enough to eat over the summer.

“Families struggle to supply children with basic needs during the summer break with many families missing meals and relying on the support of food banks to feed children who would normally be entitled to a free school meal.”

“Low income and debt plays a huge part within the families that I work with the increase in food bank usage had tripled. Especially during the summer when the children are home from school.”

“We are noticing that more families are asking us for food bank vouchers during the summer months and telling us they are struggling financially more - food bills, school uniform costs, petrol etc – which is massively impacting what they can do as a family.”

⁴ www.trusselltrust.org/2019/07/16/uk-food-banks-fear-busiest-summer-ever-ahead/

Being ready to go back to school

“It takes our students nearly a full term to recover from being on summer holidays. We see a significant deterioration in behaviour in September.”

Whilst many children will be heading back to school ready to face the new year ahead, 74% of support professionals said they work with children who return being less able to do well at school due to a lack of opportunities over the summer.

Lack of routine

For some children, school provides a structure and routine that is lacking at home. After six weeks away it can be a struggle to readjust to the rhythms and expected behaviour of school life.

“A significant number of the children I support have social and emotional problems, anxiety etc and they benefit from the predictable routine and structure during the school term. When they have a long break of 6 weeks with no planned routine and no structure, this can make it difficult for them to cope. Their anxiety increases and the skills they learned in school often regress. This means, they require a great deal of support at the start of the new term.”

“It takes the children much longer to settle back into the routine of school. For some this is in part due to their parents/carers struggling to get back into the routine. Often children come back to school after a stressful summer break and can be preoccupied whilst they try and make some sense of the experiences during summer. They are happy to be back to school with staff who they trust and who can help them express their emotions.”

“Our kids are left behind and it’s clear to see the ones who get the opportunities to experience trips, activities, holidays compared to ours who don’t.”

Lack of opportunities

The lack of opportunities over the summer can limit a child’s range of experience meaning they are less able to achieve, according to support professionals.

“Most of the children in the families that I support have a narrow view of the world due to having limited opportunities in the holidays. They often get bullied for being poor.”

“Before you can read you need to be able to speak and to have a brain full of language. This takes time, experiences and nurturing. How can you describe the sea if you have never seen, smelt, touched and tasted it? Without opportunities for our children to have these experiences they are always behind in their reading and writing because their language is limited.”

“There is nothing new that has happened for them, nothing to share with peers on return from school and no break from the normal routine at all to refresh them and for them to see each other in different environments. It also lowers expectations for families and the children - they are not imagining next year’s events to look forward to or to ‘keep warm’ on previous memories of fun days out/trips.”

Not able to join in

Support professionals told us that children struggle when they return to school due to the sense of embarrassment and shame when they are not able to join in conversations about what they did over the summer.

“Children feel ashamed that they cannot contribute in class discussions about summer activities, or with friends who talk about the things they have done; this can cause children to act out and spend time in isolation or try to avoid going to school and both will adversely affect education.”

“The children I deal with have told me in the past that they find it hard to go back to school after any holiday, hearing what others have done and places they have visited when they have rarely ventured out, and have nothing to report.”

“Children with fewer or no opportunities to do things do struggle when term starts as they have nothing new to talk about. They can feel less involved with peers who have done things so this will cause them to withdraw and not join in.”

“I have worked with children who have had to make up things that they have done over the holidays.”

This means that the children who have missed out on breaks and days out are not only less ready to achieve when they go back to school but who actively avoid engaging with their peers due to the lack of stories to tell, experiences to share and memories to recollect.

Conclusion

This survey highlights just how many children are missing out on a holiday or day out over the summer and the detrimental effect this has for both them and their parents. The long summer break can leave children more isolated, exposed to more violence and abuse, struggling with mental health issues and, shockingly, struggling to get enough to eat.

A break or day out is not going to address all the challenges highlighted in this report but at the Family Holiday Association, we know the difference that breaks and days out can make. They improve mental wellbeing, help families communicate better with each other, broaden horizons and give children something to talk about when they go back to school.

If more families are able to go beyond their local area during the long summer holidays, then more children will go back to school, ready to start the new year having had fun, explored new places and spent time with their family and friends.

We think that a break or day out is a simple and relatively inexpensive way to make a profound positive impact for children and their families.



3 Gainsford Street, London, SE1 2NE
020 3117 0650

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www.FamilyHolidayAssociation.org.uk