



# Attending the School of Life on FAMILY VACATIONS



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*The inspiration for this article comes from a French movie I watched on my flight back to Singapore from a recent overseas vacation. My return to the reality of work and caregiving responsibilities after a shopping and eating frenzy in Seoul was somewhat softened by the array of movie choices in the onboard entertainment menu.*





I love watching French movies so the title, L'École buissonnière (The School of Life) and its short description kindled my interest and the movie did not disappoint.

What was the movie all about?  
The School of Life

takes place in the rustic French countryside after World War I. Paul is one of the many thousands of children left orphaned. Celestine, an old friend of Paul's mother, is persuaded to foster him and she takes him back to the country estate where she and her husband, Borel, work for the Count who owns the estate. This is where Paul begins his informal learning journey. The movie captures Paul's transition from a lonely and self-willed entity to becoming a member of a family unit. Paul not only comes to accept and reciprocate the affection he receives from his new family and friends, but he also comes to appreciate and care for the magnificent forest that is part of the country estate.

Interestingly the French title, L'École buissonnière, translates as "skip school". It is not my intention to advise parents that they should let their children deliberately skip school. In my opinion, the movie was a wonderful reminder that much valuable learning can take place outside the confines of a formal classroom. The school of life is the informal classroom of daily living.

What kinds of learning can your child glean from the school of life? The movie showed me that self-discovery, relationships, and practical skills are three main areas of learning.

When the movie begins, Paul does not seem to have much interest in anything. He is largely neglected being one of the many residents of the orphanage and he follows the daily mundane routine there mechanically. He does not think and feel much as he does not have much sense of who he is and what he can do. Paul's world changes when he moves to the country estate and lives with Celestine and Borel. He starts to experience new emotions and a sense of self as he finds his place as a member of their family and part of the larger

community of the residents in the village. Paul explores the forest both on his own and later under the tutelage of an eccentric poacher, Totoche. He begins to see the wildlife with new eyes and a deep interest in preserving nature is sparked in him. Totoche teaches Paul how to survive in the forest while Celestine teaches him to embrace his unique self, love others and use what he has for the good of everyone and the wildlife in the forest.

Paul's transformation was the result of new and myriad opportunities to grow and learn in the school of life. What new opportunities are you giving your child to discover more about himself especially his interests and strengths? What new opportunities are you giving your child to build his relationships with family and friends? What new opportunities are you giving your child to develop practical lifelong skills?



*A family vacation can provide these new opportunities for your child to grow in the three areas:*

## BEFORE THE HOLIDAY



Your child's participant in the pre-holiday stage will give him a sense of ownership in ensuring the success of the holiday and he is more likely to be an active participant than a passive consumer.



Get your child to assist you in gathering information on possible destinations and the itinerary. You can read blogs and tourism board websites together and compile useful information using graphic organisers.



You may even task your child to get feedback from relatives and friends who have been to the destination of interest.



A list of starter questions such as:

- ◆ "What did you do?"
- ◆ "What did you like about the place?" and
- ◆ "Where did you stay?"



This could provide your child with the tools to gather information and perspectives to aid in the decision-making later. You child will also learn some useful basics of doing research.



Involve your child in some of the final decision-making and planning of the itinerary. This gives him an opportunity him to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the choices available and to discover what are his preferences.



According to Dr Dave Anderson, the senior director at the Child Mind Institute in the United States, "kids look to adults to model decision-making choices."



Your child will also learn the art of compromise as he learns that the enjoyment of each family member is more important than his wants alone. At the same time, it would be good to plan, if possible, for specific small group or pair activities that might interest your child.



When I was in Seoul, I noticed that fathers and children especially boys sat waiting for mums and older sisters to complete their retail therapy.

The small group or pair activities would be more avenues for your child to grow and learn while others in the family indulge in their shopping fantasies.

Give your child the responsibility of organising some of the things he needs for the trip. You can teach him to use a checklist to ensure that he packs or gives you the clothes or things he requires. It is very likely a younger child would be more dependent on his parents to perform the task of packing. However, the opportunity presents to raise his awareness of his basic needs while preparing for an overseas trip.



## DURING THE HOLIDAY

Your child will experience new sights, people and even a new culture during the holiday. There are added opportunities beyond these.

Give your child some responsibility. It could be something as simple as counting the number of pieces of luggage or checking that nothing has been left behind as you move from one accommodation to another. On vacations with extended family members, you could get your child to hold onto his grandparent or younger cousin to ensure he/she walks safely in the unfamiliar streets. This additional responsibility will build your child's belief in himself. Your child's understanding of family ties is also strengthened as he learns to do his part to ensure a smooth and safe family holiday.

Talk about your child's experiences each day. Ask open-ended questions such as "What did you enjoy doing the most today and why?", "What did you feel when you saw the \_\_\_\_\_ at the \_\_\_\_\_?", "How is the subway similar/different from the one we have in Singapore?", "What did you learn about \_\_\_\_\_?", etc. These questions help your child to make sense of his experiences and he learns to give reasons for his opinions and feelings. This again helps him to have a stronger sense of who he is and what matters to him.

Model making choices especially when the best-laid plans seem to go wrong. For example, there could be a change of weather or temperature that necessitates the postponement or cancellation of an activity. Demonstrate outlining the circumstances and potential options and invite your child to offer his opinions. This will help him to recognize and exercise the need for flexibility in different situations. Cognitive flexibility is an important aspect of your child's executive function.

Teach your child the practical skills to navigate an unfamiliar landscape. These include looking for signages, asking for directions, learning to read a map or using a tourist guidebook. Your child will learn to solve problems independently and ask for help when necessary.

Give your child a small holiday allowance if possible. Model making decisions on what to spend that allowance on. You may even encourage him to buy at least one inexpensive gift for someone back in Singapore. The gift could be for a close friend or even the family's domestic

helper who did not come along. This again gives him opportunities to consider his interests, needs and wants verses that of others and to show affection and appreciation in small ways.

## AFTER THE HOLIDAY

The family holiday may be over but there are still opportunities to engage your child in the process of learning and growing.

Work with your child to create a memento of the family holiday. The medium can range from a conventional scrapbook to a power point presentation with pictures and music. This gives your child an opportunity to feel proud of the active part he played in the family holiday while he learns new skills to put together the memento.

As you relive memorable places and activities with your child, encourage him to reflect on questions such as "What makes a family vacation enjoyable?", "What did you learn about yourself on this holiday?", "What did you learn about our family on this holiday?", etc. Discussing these questions helps your child increase his awareness of who he is and what he can do. At the same time, he comes to understand where his practical skills may be lacking in and this could provide the impetus to improve these skills under the tutelage of a mentor. Finally, your child will see value in spending time with his family and come to a deeper understanding of each family member.

Of course, the age of your child matters in the way you set up a family vacation as an informal learning journey for him. The Latin phrase, *Carpe diem* or "seize the day" is the best principle to adopt. Seize whatever small and big teachable moments before, during and after family vacations to mentor your child. A little time attending the school of life can go a long way for him.

### References:

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