

Kids miss school as families lured by off-peak holiday deals

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The Di Stefanos with children Lucca, 7, and Charlie, 6, who took time out from their studies at Hawthorn West Primary School last month for an off-peak family holiday to Bali. Photo: Simon O'Dwyer

FOR Diane and Mario Di Stefano, it was a chance to give their boys a cultural experience. Tired of missing out on the best deals because they fell inside the school term, last month they did what growing numbers of parents are opting to do and took their children out of school for a holiday - in their case, two weeks in Bali.

"It gets so frustrating seeing all these deals, knowing that they're never for the school holidays," says Mrs Di Stefano, who runs Richmond's Bendigo Street food store with her husband.

"They learn so much from travelling anyway, especially at that age. It's really good for [the children] to be amongst different people.

"They get to experience a different culture and way of life, including having the same Balinese babysitter they had two years ago teaching them Indonesian words and songs."

But the increasing number of students skipping school for reasons other than illness, and a growing trend for travel companies to target them with bargain holidays during school terms, has concerned educators.

They warn that parents may be unaware they are technically breaking the law. Under the Victorian Education and Training Reform Act 2006, parents can be fined \$116.82 a day for keeping their child at home without a reasonable excuse.

Taking children on holidays is not seen as a valid excuse.

Figures on the number of students absent on family holidays are not kept by the Education Department, but Victorian Principals Association president Gabrielle Leigh says schools are reporting a significant increase in children being taken out of school for holidays.

On average, about 38,000 state school students are absent every day - one student in 14 around Victoria. Some schools lose up to 25 per cent of students in the week before or after holidays.

Jetstar recently ran a "Kids fly, stay and eat free" promotion for trips to Queensland taken during the first school term in 2010.

Flight Centre is offering similar Gold Coast holiday packages for travel from September 19 to December 11. Victoria's next school holidays are from September 18 to October 5. Term four

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