



Take *your* time

Kate Farr takes a look at exactly why encouraging our kids to slow down and to spend time a little more soulfully is more important than we might realise, and comes up with a few fun family days out.

It's all too easy to find yourself caught up in the day-to-day hustle of Hong Kong living when you have children; shuttling the kids here, there and everywhere, wall-to-wall activities, and responding to requests to visit theme parks, to go to shopping malls to buy the latest toy and to make a trip to the cinema. One common question parents find themselves asking is do we really need to be so concerned with filling our kids' days to the brim with activities? And is there such a big difference between a "sensory play" session and a morning at the beach?

Dr Quratulain Zaidi is a clinical psychologist living and working in Hong Kong, and she has first-hand experience of the results of overscheduled kids. "Kids come in to my office and say 'I do too much' and 'I have to do all these activities'. They are generally unhappy and not content." This discontentment can become anxiety. "Little ones can't really articulate their anxieties well and so they can manifest as anger and various other unhelpful or uncooperative behaviours." Dr Zaidi

adds, "For older kids, feelings can vary from 'just' being overwhelmed, to quite severe conditions like depression, panic attacks or even suicidal thoughts. This may then result in unhelpful coping mechanisms like self-harm or eating disorders, which have a very high prevalence in teens."

So how did we as parents fall into this habit of cramming our children's days with constant, and worse, sometimes un nourishing activities? "Nowadays the norm is to fill your child's time with as many activities as possible. People are under huge pressure to do this as they feel that they won't be good parents if they don't 'keep up' with their peers, but actually research has shown us that the benefits of relaxing the schedule are almost unlimited." She elaborates, "Unstructured, active play allows children to understand their world, building resilience. It enhances creativity and problem-solving abilities and as a result, children develop better coping mechanisms when they face adversity or unknown situations."

When asked for her own favourite family pastimes, Dr Zaidi is clear.

"Any activity that allows us to actively enjoy each other's company without the distraction of screens. Just hanging out and chatting about anything and everything, reading, playing board games, going for walks, or, if the weather's not up to it, heading to a coffee shop for a cup of tea and a piece of cake! I find that people don't laugh enough these days, so for me, creating laughter and fun moments with my kids where we just enjoy the here and now is the best thing."

Taking Dr Zaidi's advice on board, here are three easy family activities that help us to break out of the shackles of structure and simply enjoy letting our kids be kids in a natural and simple way.

Up, up and away

Originally invented in China, it's only fitting that we start with the inherently cheering pastime of flying a kite. Perhaps it's the freedom, the skill involved in controlling it from far below... or maybe just the sense of achievement when it finally launches after 15 attempts, but kite flying is loved by kids and adults alike. And



Best foot forward

We're very fortunate to live in a city that is packed with gorgeous mountainous hikes, making Hong Kong a trail-runner's paradise. But what if you're looking for a walk that's better suited to little legs, or even a stroller? We asked the lovely Rosie Fletcher, Sharon Rubin and Charley Eriksen of family-friendly walking blog **Stroll in the Kong**

(www.strollinthekong.com) about their favourite spots for hiking, biking and scooting with the whole gang.

"For a relatively easy walk to an awesome beach, we don't think a trip to **Trio Beach** can be beaten! This walk can be as short as two kilometres, and has some beautiful views over Hebe Haven. It finishes on the stunning Trio Beach, where it is easy enough to get a sampan back to the pier for a late lunch if you didn't bring a picnic."

"For a full family day out to escape the hustle and bustle of Central, we love heading to one of the outlying islands for a walk, some beach time and some cracking seafood! The **Lamma Island Family Walk** is one of our favourites; work up a sweat heading over the island admiring the views before hitting Lo So Shing Beach and one of the many restaurants in Sok Kwu Wan."

"If your little ones are small enough to sleep in the stroller (or old enough to walk the distance), then the circuit around **Shing Mun Reservoir** provides an opportunity to escape from it all. This is one of the longer strolls on our website, but can be broken up with lunch at one of the many picnic spots. The route is easy to follow, and one could be forgiven for forgetting that this is Hong Kong."

So there we have it. It's about time that we took the pressure off our children and ourselves, and set aside the schedule from time to time to make space in our diaries for what's really important – creating great family memories together. 📸

while many public parks in Hong Kong seem to go out of their way to oppose any hint of fun, there are surprisingly quite a few excellent spots around town to catch the breeze.

One of the city's most popular kite-flying spots, the 22-hectare **Tai Po Waterfront Park**, is also the largest urban park in Hong Kong, making it a good option for a family day out with a picnic. You'll meet plenty of fellow flyers here, and, judging by the size and detail of some of the kites taking to the skies above Tai Po, there are plenty of serious kite enthusiasts in Hong Kong. If you're not a kite fan, the model boating lake here is also a sure-fire hit.

Shek O Beach offers a winning combination of a long, flat space and plenty of gusts straight from the sea to launch your kite. Combine with an afternoon counting shells and paddling, before heading home sandy and happy.

Kam Tin Country Club in Yuen Long is a huge expanse of greenery, with dedicated flying space and simple children's kites for sale. Break up the day with some strawberry picking in season, or wander around the organic farm.

Grow your own

Although most of us in Hong Kong don't have access to a garden of our own, in this city of imported everything, allotments are a great way for children to learn where their food

comes from, as well as allowing them to take responsibility for tending and nurturing their own plants. There are still very few public allotments – or community gardens – in Hong Kong, but the trend is slowly catching on. Here are a few options for green-fingered families to get soil under their fingernails.

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department's **Community Garden Programme** (www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/green/garden/index.html) offers gardening courses that run three times per year all over Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories. Participants learn how to grow ornamental plants, fruit and veggies in their own small planters, and LCSD gardeners will assist with watering your plot in your absence.

HK Farm (www.hkfarm.org), along with sister project **HK Honey** (www.facebook.com/hongkonghoney) host regular school and community workshops and events highlighting the benefits of locally produced food. Based on a rooftop in Yau Ma Tei, the organisation works with community farmers across Hong Kong and encourages active participation.

City Farm (www.cityfarm.hk) rents small plots of land and planters to keen gardeners at rooftop sites in Quarry Bay, Tseun Wan and Kwun Tong, with experts on hand to offer advice. There's currently a waiting list, but the friendly team will give you the heads up as spaces become available.