“Knowing what’s out there has changed the way we think about the future – we’ve got much bigger dreams than the park across the road!”

Helping struggling families get a ScotSpirit Break

A selection of stories from families and professionals on the impact of the ScotSpirit Breaks project, created as a legacy of the Year of Young People 2018

“Everything was a new experience for the boys”

“I’m dead proud of myself for climbing Arthur’s Seat – it’s a memory I’ll cherish”

“It just shows you don’t have to go that far to have a good time”
ScotSpirit Breaks:
Yvonne & Alexander’s trip to Edinburgh

Yvonne and her 5-year-old son, Alexander, from Glasgow, went on a ScotSpirit day trip to Edinburgh Castle in October 2018.

Life was just about doing the usual, everyday things, like going across the road to the park, nothing exciting. Sometimes family members would visit and pay for things, which was great, but you can’t have that all the time. I never took trips with my son, and we’d never been away together anywhere. Alexander loves buses, so sometimes we’d pack a lunch and take the number 8 bus and stay on for the whole route till we got back home – it takes 5 hours to go all the way round, so it’s a whole day out.

I’ve got three kids - one’s an adult, the other is 16 and never wants to do anything with us, and then there’s Alexander who’s 5. It’s usually just him and me – he’s really shy, but he’s got his own wee group of pals at school.

When I found out about the group trip to Edinburgh Castle I was a bit nervous about meeting other people, but I wanted to do it for Alexander. His excitement about going away somewhere with his pals rubbed off on me, I felt excited for him. It definitely made a difference to our lives knowing the trip was coming – for Alex, it was like Christmas was coming, he was always asking when we’d be going.

“Knowing what’s out there has changed the way we think about the future – we’ve got much bigger dreams than the park across the road!”

I was mostly looking forward to just getting away – I worry about everything, and always over-prepare, taking everything with us, just in case.

There were a lot of tourists at the Castle that day, and it was really windy. Alexander loved it, especially the 1 o’clock gun going off. I remember seeing his face as he listened to the different languages the people round about him were speaking – that was a totally new experience for him. I enjoyed showing my son everything, there was loads I didn’t know about, lots of wee rooms. It was quite stressful trying to keep a hold of him with so many people going about though, I was a bit panicked now and then because it was so busy.

Alexander was desperate to get back on the train after the Castle, and he loves being in bus and train stations, just watching everything that’s going on. The 1 o’clock gun, seeing his pals and going on the train - they were the highlights of the trip for him.

Continued...
“I’m definitely more likely to take my son on a break somewhere after going on the day trip”

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We were so tired at the end of the day, but it was a good tired, because you felt you’d done something with your day, and enjoyed it – not the kind of tired where you’re stressed out all the time. It was a brilliant day out for him and me.

I did feel a bit more confident after the trip, just knowing that I could do it, that I could jump on a train with Alexander and go somewhere like that, it was satisfying thinking that. I remember my sister phoned afterwards to hear about it, and I think she was expecting bad news, so it was really good to be able to tell her it was all great – there was really nothing negative to tell her.

Alexander told all his classmates about it, which was quite something for him, as he’s normally so shy. It’s been good to sit and talk about it with him – he still remembers the trip, and asks me when we can go again.

Knowing what’s out there, what Alex enjoys, it has changed the way we think about the future – we’ve got much bigger dreams than the park across the road! He talks about going on the train, and the buses, and he wants to go further afield. If we go into Buchanan Bus Station, he’s amazed by it all – he just wants to jump on a bus and go somewhere – anywhere, whereas I can be a bit panicked by it all. Once or twice we’ve got off the Number 8 bus at a random swing park and I’ve not known where we are, but at least I know I can just get on the next one going past, and make it back home.

I’m definitely more likely to take my son on a break somewhere after going on the day trip to Edinburgh - I could maybe go and visit my sister in Dunfermline. I’d tell other families thinking about a ScotsSpirit break to just do it – it’s amazing what stuff like this can do for your confidence.

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ScotSpirit Breaks: A short break in your own city

Lee Anthony is Lead Practitioner with One Parent Families Scotland, a charity that helps single parent families across the country. She was supporting a single mother of three in Glasgow that led to a weekend break in the city’s west end.

The ScotSpirit breaks are a key way to support the families we work with, in terms of giving them something to look forward to, enjoy and remember. Just the idea of a break makes the daily challenges faced by these families more manageable.

The Mum was on Jobseekers Allowance, with three kids aged 13, 9 and 6. Her 9-year-old son had major behavioural issues, and was struggling at school, which was having an impact on the rest of the family. Even things like getting the kids ready for school was challenging because the son would lock himself in the bathroom in the mornings. The Mum was conscious she was getting a bad reputation with the teachers at school, and that other authorities would be viewing her as unreliable, so she was under a lot of pressure.

“These experiences allow people a health sense of pride and you can see the change when it happens”

When I mentioned the break to her, her reaction was one of disbelief. She was really excited by the prospect of staying at the Hilton Grosvenor, because it was just round the corner from them, but a completely different world from the one they knew. She’d passed this place countless times and admired it, and now she was getting to take her family there for a weekend – she was a bit over-awed. The kids couldn’t believe it either.

They were given tickets for City Sightseeing’s open top bus tour and the Glasgow Science Centre. They had a magical time – the trip allowed them to be in a setting where they felt special and valued, where they were able to build happy memories together, sharing a different experience. It was something they’d never known as they’d never had a family break before.

The whole combination of staying in a lovely place, and having these attractions to visit and plan the weekend around was so incredibly rewarding for them. But perhaps what meant the most to the Mum was being able to treat her kids to something she wouldn’t otherwise have been able to – and to have a sense of harmony in the family. The 6-year-old daughter was so taken with the hotel - she said it had been like living in a palace! She clearly felt really special, which was lovely to see.

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“Just the idea of a break makes the daily challenges faced by families more manageable”

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Following the break, her son wasn’t causing as much stress. He was able to go back to school and talk about the break. These experiences allow people a healthy sense of pride, and allow them to feel valued – and you can see the change in people when that happens.

There was a definite short-term impact on overall stress levels – there were noticeable differences in the son’s behavior, and they got along better as a family. Sharing the experience by talking about it helped the trip to have a more lasting impact as well.

In the longer term, I think the fact they’d had such a positive experience meant they were more able to consider taking another break, perhaps outside Glasgow, and maybe even gained a sense of optimism. Even though it’s a ‘gift’, parents take a pride in being able to provide something for their children, and it’s great that the breaks are provided in a way that doesn’t make the families feel like they’re charity cases. A good job has been done by all parties so that the families can just enjoy time away together.

I’m sure these breaks have a positive impact on other services as well, in terms of reducing the public spend on the NHS for example. When people feel better about themselves they’re less likely to go to the doctor, they’ll have better relationships with people at the Job Centre and so on – all of that is good for the mental health of struggling single parents, and the wider society.

The ScotSpirit breaks certainly complement the package of support we provide to single parents – it’s absolutely amazing to be able to offer these experiences to struggling families.

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ScotSpirit Breaks:
A trip to Glasgow, a massive difference

Margo Gemmell, a social work assistant in South Lanarkshire, was supporting a single mother of three who has serious mental health issues. She referred them for a ScotSpirit break that led to a family day out in Glasgow.

Daily life was really tough for this family. There were three children aged 17, 15 and 7, and their Mum suffered from mental health issues that meant she struggled to get out of bed, let alone the house. They had a car, but the Mum never took them anywhere.

I was really keen for them to have the chance of a break but worried that the Mum might not be fit enough. I couldn’t believe she was so up for it – and I think she was surprised by her own enthusiasm for a new experience, it was as if she didn’t need to think about it.

Going far away would have been too much for the Mum so they had a day out in Glasgow. They were looking forward to doing different things – going swimming, seeing different places, just spending good time together. They went on a City Sightseeing bus tour round the city – I don’t think they realised how much Glasgow had to offer, how much was right there on the doorstep.

“I’ve seen first hand that breaks are profoundly life-changing opportunities for struggling families”

Afterwards, she sent me an email saying it was absolutely fabulous. People say it’s only a day out but when you’ve got nothing else, that’s huge - this was the first break that family had ever been on. Normally she wouldn’t even have thought about going anywhere, but because she had the opportunity and the support, it was so much easier for her.

I saw such a difference in them. The day trip opened up their minds to everything, especially the teenagers, I’m sure it really helped them to develop. Shortly afterwards the 17-year-old son told me it had made a world of difference to his family. He said it was life-changing to go and do things together, with their Mum not showing any signs of her illness - they’d never seen her like that before, and never thought they would. He clearly saw the world a bit differently.

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“It was life-changing to go and do things together, with their mum not showing any signs of her illness – they’d never seen her like that before, and never thought they would.”

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Things certainly improved in the weeks after their break – you could tell the Mum was a wee bit happier, and the daughter a wee bit more talkative. The Mum started to go out more – I think she’d gained confidence knowing they’d done that trip on their own, and that she didn’t need me there holding her hand.

I could have left that family thinking everything was fine – the difference before and after the break was like night and day. They coped much better with life for a while but things later deteriorated – I only wish we could give them other opportunities like this, they need more of these positive experiences in their lives.

The memory of the trip will be with them for the rest of their lives. It will help those teenagers when they become parents. If you think about how their lives were beforehand, it was heartwarming to be able to show them a bit more of the big world out there, and that life with their Mum can be good under different circumstances.

These breaks make a massive difference to a family’s life. Of all the work I do, I’d say the breaks are the most important - the opportunity to show them there’s another world out there. If I weren’t able to offer these breaks to families, I would find my job much harder, because I’ve seen first hand that they are profoundly life-changing opportunities – they are magical experiences for struggling families.

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ScotSpirit Breaks: John and Rebecca’s break to Aviemore

John and his 9-year-old daughter, Rebecca, from Aberdeen, went on a ScotSpirit break to Aviemore in 2016.

Living with mental health issues, I was leading quite an isolated life at home, and would leave the house only occasionally to pick up Rebecca. When I heard we were going to get the chance of a holiday together, it sort of woke me up a wee bit, put some excitement in me. We’d never had a holiday together before. The idea of something to look forward to, and the thought of spending quality time with my daughter – I think I started preparing right away. We were both excited about spending proper time together, doing different things.

We stayed for two nights in the Hilton at Coylumbridge, Aviemore. I was a wee bit overwhelmed when we arrived but the staff were amazing – one guy seemed to sense my anxiety and just handled it all without making an issue of it, he was so professional. All the staff just looked after us so well – we’d never experienced anything like that before.

“The confidence I gained from the break gave me the courage to get out of the house and do things.”

They gave us tickets to the Highland Wildlife Park – it was brilliant, Rebecca loved the polar bears. We went to Landmark too, it was a fantastic place. The highlight for me was taking the funicular railway up Cairngorm – that was an amazing experience. Standing up there looking at the scenery with Rebecca, just taking in the beauty, the peace and tranquility – I’ll remember it forever.

After Landmark we walked through Carrbridge, it’s a beautiful wee place. It was so good to get away together and have these experiences – we couldn’t have done any of these things otherwise.

I sometimes struggle to go and do things, so I did feel a bit anxious about the break beforehand, but it made such a difference having that quality time with my daughter. We were a lot closer after the break, we’d talk more rather than just watch TV, she’d tell me about things that were happening at school, they were proper conversations. She still talks about the holiday.

Continued...
“It made such a difference having that quality time with my daughter. We were a lot closer afterwards.”

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The break made me look at my life differently, it made me want to go and do other things. I felt more confident, and started getting out more. It felt good to get away from the dull, daily routines. At home I’d sit there with all these thoughts in my head, but all that stopped the day we left for the holiday – the whole time we were away I had something else to think about, I slept better as well.

I started taking forest walks, and I did a 12-week course with forest rangers through the local council. The confidence I gained from the break gave me the courage to get out of the house and do things with Rebecca that we hadn’t really done before - it really benefitted the two of us, I think it boosted her confidence as well.

We really want to go back to Carrbridge, we’re saving up for it. One of the things we’d like to do that we didn’t get a chance to do on the break is visit the Cairngorm Reindeer Centre. And we’d go back to Landmark and do all the things that Rebecca couldn’t do last time because she was too wee!

The break was an amazing experience for my daughter and me, I couldn’t fault it. They took such good care of us, everything was planned to the last detail. I’d tell any families considering a break to set any worries aside and just go for it, because it’ll be so rewarding, and make a big difference to their lives.

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ScotSpirit Breaks: Helping a family visit Aviemore

Housing Support Worker, Lorraine Hewitt referred Aberdeen Dad, John, and his daughter, Rebecca, for a ScotSpirit break to Aviemore in 2016.

John was suffering from extreme anxiety and panic attacks which made it hard for him to leave the house. He only saw his daughter twice a week, but I was conscious that he always tried so hard to make things nice for her. I knew he struggled financially but he always gave her the best he could, he’d get nice food in when she was coming to visit.

When you recognise a family that’s really struggling, you know that the chance of some time away can be life-changing - assuming they can cope, initially with the idea, and then with the reality of it. I just felt John could benefit so much from some time away with Rebecca.

“When you recognise a family that’s really struggling, you know that some time away can be life changing”

He was dealing with issues around access to Rebecca, but once these were resolved I suggested a break to them. He was excited about it, but there was a level of anxiety too - about the travel, spending money, and how he would cope on his own. It really helped that they were given tickets to the Cairngorm Funicular Railway and the Highland Wildlife Park before they went, as that removed the financial worry around having to buy tickets.

The break gave them a much-needed change of scenery. For John it was about spending quality time with his daughter, and providing fun experiences for her that he couldn’t otherwise. One of the highlights was a walk they took - he talked about the spectacular scenery and the two of them just standing there looking at this amazing view of the Cairngorms and thinking how beautiful it was. He said that would be one of his lasting memories from the trip, which I hadn’t really expected.

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“The break has given him long-lasting memories.”

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There was an improvement in his confidence after the break, and maybe even a sense of pride that he had been able to take his daughter away by himself. The whole experience is a huge deal for someone living with depression and anxiety – having to get ready for a holiday, having to go away by yourself, having to drive. But John did all of it. He seemed happier afterwards, maybe a bit more relaxed and self-sufficient. I certainly think the break was hugely beneficial to them both.

He still speaks about the break, it’s given him long-lasting memories. It was such a positive experience for them, and I know it took a lot for him to do it. Initially I had worried that it might all seem too overwhelming for him, but he managed.

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ScotSpirit Breaks: A family day out to Edinburgh

Shona from Glasgow took her 13-year-old son, Stuart, and her 11-year-old grandson, Kieran, on a ScotSpirit day trip to Edinburgh Castle in 2018.

We’d never had any family breaks or day trips before going to Edinburgh. Daily life is pretty routine – the boys are either on their computer or in and out the house playing. Sometimes I take them up to the park on their bikes – we never really go places where you have to pay for anything.

I was delighted to hear about the day trip – I knew it would be something the boys would enjoy. I’d never been to Edinburgh Castle - I’d seen it from Princes Street years ago but never been any closer.

I was most excited about getting a day out with the kids. Every kid wants to go to Edinburgh Castle – it’s huge! They were looking forward to it as well, and I was very interested and curious to get inside and see what it was actually like - you see pictures, but it’s not the same as going inside. My Dad had mentioned Arthur’s Seat to the boys, so they were looking forward to that too.

“We’d never had any family breaks or day trips before”

We wanted to see everything. The castle is absolutely enormous, and they both loved it. The best bits were the 1 o’clock gun, and seeing all the armoury - boys’ stuff, it was exactly their kind of thing! We saw all these big axes and guns, and they stood in the sentry boxes and had their photos taken. But getting on the train and going somewhere – that was great too because we always use the bus.

After the castle, we ended up climbing Arthur’s Seat. The boys had a ball, and it’s memories for them isn’t it? We took loads of pictures and videos. Climbing the hill wasn’t too bad – although half way up I thought ‘I’m not sure if I’m going to make it’, but then I carried on because I didn’t want to let the boys down. They love to talk about the time they dragged me up Arthur’s Seat!

We walked up and down the length of the Royal Mile too – we’d been given the tickets to the castle, and I thought we should make a day of it.

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“I think for them to be able to say I’ve been in Edinburgh Castle, I’ve been inside it, that’s a big deal for them.”

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The day trip was great because I don’t get to spend much time doing things like that with them, these things are expensive. They loved the castle, and they wanted to see everything – and we got to bring a few things home like the map of the castle, and a couple of souvenirs - we bought a fridge magnet and my son bought a war-time ration book for his nan who’s just turned 90 – she loved it. Nice wee things you can keep and remember stuff by.

Everything was a new experience for the boys – they learned a lot of stuff at the castle, there are so many plaques there with lots of information, and Kieran loves reading. I think for them to be able to say I’ve been in Edinburgh Castle, I’ve been inside it, that’s a big deal for them.

We knew this was a special chance to do these things, because you never know when you might get to do it again. We made the most of the opportunity basically - I can’t afford to buy three train tickets to get us all out there and pay for any attractions.

I was a bit apprehensive about the trip because I’d never really taken the two of them away by myself. But the fact that they were occupied the whole day meant there were no arguments. I was worried they might start arguing, and that just spoils the day. But that never happened, and knowing that has made me more confident to do it again myself.

I’d like to do more with them, spend more quality time with them. I’d definitely go on another break. I like exercise and fresh air, so I’d prefer to do stuff outside and get them away from their play stations. If there was any spare money I’d probably go to Edinburgh again because it would be familiar and I know they’d enjoy it.

I’m dead proud of myself for climbing Arthur’s Seat - it’s a memory I’ll cherish. There’s not many folk can say they’ve climbed Arthur’s Seat with their son and their grandson. We were all exhausted when we got home, it was a great day out. You’ve got to grab these opportunities and make the most of them – it’s a waste otherwise.

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ScotSpirit Breaks:
Group trip to Oban – a referrer’s story

While most ScotSpirit breaks are offered to individual families, occasional opportunities arise for group breaks. Emile Van Loo and John Marr are Community and Family Development Workers for With Kids, a charity that supports families dealing with a wide range of issues. They accompanied 7 families, comprising 9 adults and 15 kids, on a group break to Oban in September 2018.

When we heard about the ScotSpirit Breaks, we realised what a fantastic opportunity they could offer some of the families we work with. We identified a group that were all from the same school and saw the trip as a great way to build relationships. It was so convenient for us to have someone else arranging everything.

Daily life is hard for these families – they’re predominantly single parents on very limited incomes, some with several kids, having to deal with the constant stress of making ends meet. Most of them had never been on a proper holiday before, and it wasn’t even on the horizon for them – the focus is just on getting through the week, or the month.

“The break showed them that a holiday could be a positive experience, and not stressful”

When we told them about the opportunity, they were so excited. Just knowing that there's a break coming can make a big difference to a family – it’s something to look forward to, and makes dealing with the everyday stuff a bit easier. The kids were really excited by the prospect of going away somewhere new. Some of them had never left Edinburgh.

There weren’t many expectations – most of them didn’t know what Oban or the west of Scotland was like, so it was the unknown that made it exciting. It helped that it was allorganised for them, and that we went with them - by being there we took the anxiety away and just left them with an adventure. There was perhaps a residual anxiety about what it was going to be like, but for the most part, they were all just really looking forward to it.

We were given an Abellio Scotrail voucher for the train journey which made it really easy. It was great to be able to take them away somewhere totally different – the train ride to Oban is a world away from here. I think being able to lose phone signal and know that you are completely free from the issues back home was actually a big relief for many of them.

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“Being able to go on a holiday is an extremely valuable experience for these families and not something we could have offered without ScotSpirit Breaks.”

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We stayed for two nights in the Oban Youth Hostel. The group had its own separate building, which was ideal, as it meant the parents weren’t worried about their kids disturbing other guests. They provided us with packed lunches too, so we didn’t really have to think about meals. The service was fantastic.

We’d been given tickets to the Scottish Sea Life Sanctuary, which was great as it catered for the wide age range of kids we had, from 3 to 11. But the highlight of the trip for the kids was probably the sense of freedom they had - playing board games, hide and seek, and being on the beach, which was just across the road from the hostel.

The biggest thing the break gave the families was time and space in a new place. Getting away from your daily environment makes it a lot easier to let go of everything that’s going on at home. Daily life is so stressful for some of these parents that they don’t have the energy reserves left to enjoy time with their kids. It was nice for them to be able to let all that stress go for a while.

They were definitely more relaxed and refreshed afterwards, and some of the relationships between family members seemed less strained. Friendships were stronger, especially between the Mums - the shared experience seemed to have brought them closer. The kids often spoke about the break - about the beach, playing hide and seek and making toast. They didn’t seem to need too many organised activities - they made their own stuff to do, inspired by their new environment.

The families seemed more confident too, and talked about when and how they could go again. The break showed them that a holiday could be a positive experience, and not stressful. There was a clear looking forward, and an appreciation of something that had initially seemed out of reach for them.

Being able to go on a holiday is an extremely valuable experience for these families, and not something we could have offered them without the ScotSpirit Breaks initiative. The breaks reinforce the work we do by giving families something to look forward to that’s not part of their ordinary routine. Spending time with the families in a different setting was valuable for us too, as we all got to see each other in a different light, which ultimately builds trust, and relationships generally.

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ScotSpirit Breaks: Group trip to Oban from Sighthill

While most ScotSpirit breaks are offered to individual families, opportunities occasionally arise for group breaks. Sinda, Mechelle, Leah and their kids went on a group break to Oban in September 2018, with four other families from their local school in Sighthill, Edinburgh.

Leah recalls how she felt before the break. “Daily life was pretty stressful – as a single parent, I can’t really afford to take my son to many places. I was really excited by the prospect of a trip, and knowing a few of my son’s friends were going too made it even better, as I knew he’d have someone to play with. It made it more exciting to know we were going with people we knew, and could share the experience with. It was great getting away to a place I’d never been before.”

Mechelle agrees: “Me and my son had never had a break before - we had never left Edinburgh. I didn’t think anything like that was available to us. Oban was beautiful, we had an amazing time – and the kids all got along so well.”

“The break made me want to do more with my son – just spend more time together”

“It was very exciting,” agrees Sinda. “Especially to have the chance to take my Mum with us, because she helped me with the kids. I was so happy that it didn’t take much to prepare for the trip, it was all just so exciting. To take the kids on holiday to the seaside – it was a wonderful thing to look forward to.”

The group spent two nights in the Oban Youth Hostel. “I’d never stayed in a hostel before, and was a bit apprehensive about it,” explains Leah. “But it was spotless, everything was really clean. Having our own space was perfect – and the food was great.”

Oban and its various attractions proved popular with all of them, as Sinda explains: “I loved the seaside, and the weather was perfect too. We all got along so well. The Scottish Sea Life Sanctuary was very good – stress free, and great for the whole family. My kids enjoyed collecting shells on the beach which was just across the road from the hostel, it was perfect.”

“The break had short and long term benefits - we all had more of a bond, we were much closer, the kids as well.”

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“We all had more of a bond, we were much closer, the kids as well.”

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Leah agrees: “The Scottish Sea Life Sanctuary was great – the kids had a wee quiz to do, looking for different animals and stuff, that kept them busy. It was just so good to get a change of scenery...just a break from home. At home I’d watch TV, whereas there we would chat or just go for a walk. My son loved seeing all the different boats in the harbour.”

“I found my own wee step where I’d sit by myself and just listen to the ocean, that was amazing,” recalls Mechelle. “My son loved the freedom of being able to come and go at the hostel – we had our own part that was separate from the rest of the hostel so it was perfect because we didn’t worry about disturbing anyone.”

The break had a range of short and long term benefits, as Leah explains: “We all had more of a bond, we were much closer, the kids as well. It made me appreciate Edinburgh more too, it was quite nice to come back to! The break made me want to do more with my son – just spend more time together, maybe go on another holiday. I think it taught me to give places a chance – Oban’s a lovely wee town, but I’d never have thought to go there. It just shows you don’t have to go that far to have a good time.”

“I was more relaxed after the break because we didn’t have any chores to do while we were away - that was great,” adds Sinda.

Following the break, all three were keen to explore other parts of Scotland with their kids, given the chance. “I’d like to find Nessie,” laughs Leah. “I’d go back to the seaside, I loved the destination, it was like paradise,” adds Sinda. “I've never been anywhere apart from Oban, and we had a ball,” says Mechelle. “I’d definitely go somewhere else.”

As for whether they’d recommend the experience, there is no doubt in their minds. “They should definitely go,” says Mechelle. “It’s stress-free, all the kids stick together and do their own thing and you get to just chat with the adults, and see new places.”

Leah agrees: “People worry about how they can afford it but knowing that it was all covered made it so much easier. I’d tell other families thinking about a break to give it a chance and just go for it. We’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

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The Family Holiday Association is the leading national charity providing breaks and days out for struggling families across the UK and is a registered charity in England and Wales (800262) and Scotland (SC048203).