Zhang Shuling is one of millions of migrant workers in China who leave their children behind when they return to work at the end of every lunar new year, knowing they will not see them until the holiday comes around again.

“For the wellbeing of the whole family, I have to work away from home,” she said.

But this year, Ms Zhang was reunited with her son Botao for a month during the school summer holidays. The move was part of a pilot programme run by several factories in the manufacturing heartland of Guangdong province to mitigate the damage to “left-behind children” and their parents.

While she completes her shift making greeting cards for Hallmark, Botao and about 50 other children spend the day in a temporary childcare facility at the Golden Cup Printing factory in the southern Chinese city of Dongguan, drawing pandas and making rice cakes.

“Even for the new year holiday there are only around 10 days, but now he can stay with us for a month,” said Ms Zhang.
Migrant worker Luo Zuozou spends time with his six-year-old son Litong at the Golden Cup Printing factory, in the south-eastern Chinese city of Dongguan © FT

The summer childcare initiative was launched in 2016 by the ICTI Ethical Toy Program, an international not-for-profit organisation funded by factories, toy brands and retailers to audit labour and safety standards.

For businesses, one aim is to help attract and retain workers. In China this is becoming increasingly difficult because of a shrinking labour force and shifting employment preferences, with many younger Chinese less willing than their parents to work in a distant factory.

Some 69m children have been left behind in China’s small towns and villages because one or both parents have migrated for work, according to an analysis of 2015 census data by Unicef, the UN children’s fund.

The Chinese government, which has promised to do more for the children affected by widespread migration, has cited a much lower figure of 9m, based on children who are away from both parents.

Grandparents look after many left-behind children but Unicef says many lack adequate care and support, leading to a “negative impact on their physical, educational and psychosocial development and wellbeing”.

https://www.ft.com/content/1f3df370-a1f9-11e8-85da-eeb7a9ce36e4
Alice Yeung, a director of the family-owned Golden Cup Printing factory, said she joined the Ethical Toy Program’s “family friendly spaces” initiative to help her business as well as to improve working conditions.

Like many other manufacturing executives in China, she is finding it increasingly difficult to find enough workers at wage levels where she can maintain profit margins. She sees the summer day care programme, which cost her Rmb40,000 ($5,800) to run this year, as one way to attract and retain working parents.

“It really doesn’t cost much to us,” said Ms Yeung. “It is so easy. If you want to do it you can do it.”

Mark Robertson of the Ethical Toy Program said that other participating factories have reported improvement in their ability to recruit and retain staff, as well as better relationships between workers and management.

Lin Guanghui, the general manager of Ying De Best Top Toys, which makes Disney Marvel figurines and toys for McDonald’s Happy Meals, said joining the programme had been a “small investment with great return”. After starting to offer the “family friendly spaces” during the
summer, he said, his workers became more committed and even recommended that friends and family join the factory.

Mr Robertson said that toy brands and retailers in the west had to find “ways to help factories compete more effectively in China” as they face challenges, from rising wages to the US-China tariff dispute.

His organisation plans to expand the programme to 25-30 factories next year. However, that covers just a tiny proportion of workers separated from their children.

Critics say such initiatives are designed to burnish the public image of toy brands and factories, which are known for their tough working conditions, rather than address the core problems of low wages and inadequate housing.

“How many workers can get this kind of special care? And how long term is this?” asked Jenny Chan, assistant professor of sociology at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, who has studied social issues facing migrant workers in China. “These kids would be better off if they could be with parents on a daily basis for guidance on schoolwork, life and their daily needs.”

It would also help if the government accelerated long-discussed reforms of the hukou household registration system to make it easier for migrant workers to get access to local health and education services, said Ms Chan.

Like many migrant parents, Ms Zhang, whose job is 1,500km away from her home in Henan province, is hoping her sacrifice will ensure her children have better prospects and will not have to face her dilemma.

“I hope they could develop better in their hometown and not be like us, being forced to stay on a strange land,” she said, as she nibbled on the snacks made by her son at the day care facility.
In the meantime, the few factory workers who have participated in the family friendly space scheme say it helps ease — if not resolve — their pain.

Luo Zuozou, a native of Hebei province who has worked at the Golden Cup Printing factory for almost 10 years, said he was grateful for the chance to spend the summer with his six-year-old son Litong.

“Previously, when I tried to call him, he didn’t even want to pick up the phone, but now he will tell me his secrets,” he said.