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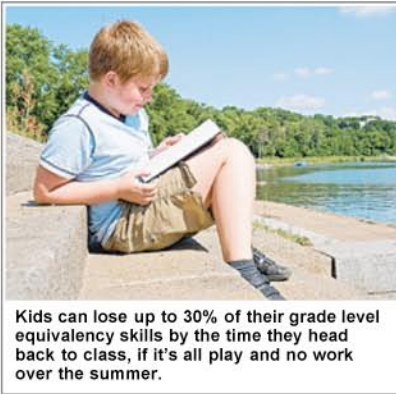


Summer school

Don't put those books away so fast - keeping kids stimulated this summer is part of a well-rounded education

By JOANNE RICHARD, QMI AGENCY

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Kids can lose up to 30% of their grade level equivalency skills by the time they head back to class, if it's all play and no work over the summer.

Use it or lose it.

Brain drain has begun – kids can lose up to 30% of their grade level equivalency skills by the time they head back to class. That's if it's all play and no work over the summer.

Learning loss can put children at a disadvantage come September, says Dr. Nick Whitehead, president of Oxford Learning. "Students can spend up to two months simply adjusting to academic schedules, rather than jumping into learning from day one, and this could lead to serious learning gaps causing students to fall behind their peers."

Letting children shut down in the summer is not to their benefit. Taking a few months off impacts any performance, whether it be in academics, athletics, drama or music, says Whitehead. "The brain is like a muscle and if you don't use it, you risk losing a significant amount of valuable learning, and it's hard to gear back up for success."

A study by Oxford Learning reveals that 54% of Canadian parents have never put their kids in academic programs over the summer.

"Summer is an excellent opportunity to connect more with your kids and keeping them engaged is the best way to prepare them for the next school year," says Whitehead, whose supplementary education centres offer summer camps, as well as daily and weekly classes, to boost knowledge and accelerate academically.

If a child gravitates toward an academic camp, that's great but certainly it's not a necessity, says Dr. Charlotte Reznick. She recommends a complete change of pace by introducing classes that focus on subjects kids aren't normally exposed to, such as robotics or photography – "fun areas where the brain is still working."

Balance is key. Reznick, a child educational psychologist, says the lazy, relaxing days of summer are necessary for children to recover and rejuvenate from the stresses of the school year. "My practice is full of kids who suffer from anxiety, headaches, stomachaches and tics from academic pressure that is put upon them from September to June."

According to Sara Dimerman, parenting educator and author of *Character is the Key*, "most kids will only attend formal academic programs if they are forced to and are unlikely to learn as much, if anything, through these programs."

Along with some planned activities, kids need free time to exercise their imagination by playing on their own and with friends, says Dimerman, of helpmesara.com. "What makes a child or an adult successful is not just how intelligent or knowledgeable he or she is. Maybe even more importantly is how they interact and respond to others in social situations."

Dr. Scott Haltzman says there's no doubt that students who continue with formal education during the summer months "will maintain a sharper academic edge and may well end up not only doing better at school," but also opening doors to future educational advancement options.

It should be stressed that academic achievement is only one kind of achieving, and only one level of mastery that is expected from a child, says Haltzman, a psychiatrist and author. "Part of the task of childhood is to learn skills, expand your knowledge of your environment, or improve your skills at socializing or communicating. Often these skills can't be gained in the classroom, and, in fact, needing to go to school or stay home or study can sometimes interfere with extremely beneficial life experiences, such as going to summer camp, taking an apprenticeship or visiting a family in another town."

Even free time can be helpful in a child's development. "Learning how to use unstructured time in a thoughtful and constructive way - away from video games or television - is a useful skill, and may foster many chances at creativity," says Haltzman, of drscott.com.

Meanwhile, summer learning loss doesn't concern Reznick. Teachers generally review the previous year's material and brains bounce back - "the value of the sheer joy and great pleasure kids get from summertime fun and freedom is well worth it," says Reznick, of imageryforkids.com and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*.

Kids deserve a break

You deserve a break today – and so do kids!

They need a mental and physical break from the structured learning and competition of the school year, says parenting educator Sara Dimerman.

"It's a mistake for parents to over-program their children over the summer months," says the author, adding that kids should get the first few weeks doing whatever they like - within reason, such as sleeping in, watching more TV than usual and staying up late.

Then schedule in planned activities for the next four to six weeks to keep them from getting into trouble, bored or even depressed as a result of inactivity and isolation, recommends Dimerman. Add to that extra family time or vacations for minds and bodies to fully relax.

Minimize learning loss by encouraging learning through play. "So a game of Monopoly to refresh math skills or chess to encourage problem solving and thinking skills strategies are better options than a more formal academic summer program which children will

likely resent and rebel against," adds Dimerman, of helpmesara.com. Trips to science centres, museums and the zoo are also great for learning and growing.

According to Dr. Charlotte Reznick, summer actually provides the chance to develop other important non-academic skills that many schools cannot focus on, stuff like arts and crafts, swimming, horseback riding, fishing and music, besides the "space-out time that brains need to develop and release creativity."

Tips for keeping brains buzzing:

- Encourage reading. Reading continually improves comprehension skills and develops vocabulary.
- Encourage creative writing in a journal or scrapbook; or developing and updating their own blog.
- Avoid having your child veg out in front of the TV.
- Play games such as Sudoku or crossword puzzles. Any game with strategy and planning is great to keep the mind working.
- Discuss things with your kids – movies you see together or while out for a walk, discuss what you see.
- Enroll your child in a class or camp, such as the Oxford Learning.
- *Dr. Nick Whitehead, Oxford Learning*

Relax, recover and renew

"Down time is for the three R's - to relax, to recover and to renew. Adults need it. Children need it. So remember: just as adults can get irritable and harder to live with when down time is insufficient, the same is true for their children."

- *Dr. Carl Pickhardt, psychologist, carlpickhardt.com*

Tips to balance summer time

Dr. Carl Pickhardt, author and adolescent expert, offers tips on a healthy balance of summer time:

- Family time – to strengthen the family unit.
- Household work time - contribute to support of the family.
- Reading/being read to time - encourage enjoyment of reading.
- Time for making/creating - opportunity for self-expression.
- Exercise/get outdoors time - physical conditioning and connecting with nature.
- Social play time – develop peer relationships.
- Limit electronic entertainment time - TV, gaming, DVD, movies - to 15 hours a week.

Parents need to appreciate the "difference between electronic escapes that arouse stimulation and encourage passivity, and engagement challenges that contribute to active growth and development," says Pickhardt, of carlpickhardt.com.