

SUMMERTIME AND THE LEARNING IS EASY

By Ann K. Dolin, M.Ed.

If you're like most Washingtonian parents at this time of year, you're relishing the days of summer. No more homework struggles, standardized tests, or jam packed afternoons of carting your children to and from extracurricular activities. The summer is a time to unwind and relax, but learning should not be discontinued. According to the foundation Reading is Fundamental, children who do not read over the summer experience a loss of reading fluency and comprehension skills. Students who engage in summertime reading actually gain skills. Research also shows that students who have not engaged in summer learning score lower on standardized tests at the end of summer break than they do on the exact same test at the end of the previous school year. In math, students lose approximately 2.6 years of grade level equivalency over the summer if they are not stimulated.

Sally Shaywitz, author of *Overcoming Dyslexia* reports that children who score in the top 10 percent on standardized tests read more than 20 minutes per day after school. Over a school year, that translates to 1.8 million words read! Students who read only five minutes for pleasure score near the 50th percentile. Sadly, students who read a minute or less on a daily basis after school hours read a mere 8,000 words per year and score in the lowest 10 percent. It is easy to understand why engaging in some type of instruction, whether it be structured or unstructured, is an integral part of continued academic growth. Parents can play an important role in encouraging learning throughout the summer months even if their child is a reluctant learner.

MAKE READING A PRIORITY!

One of the most important gifts you can give your child this summer is the ability to enjoy reading. Some children are naturally eager readers; however, others would never put the words "reading" and "fun" together. For those children, we must pull out all the stops. It is imperative to develop structure and give children a choice in what they read.

- The key to motivating reluctant readers to read is to find the right series of books that suit their interests. As a parent, you know your child best. What does he love? If it's sports, subscribe to *Sports Illustrated for Kids* or print out the latest Orioles statistics online. Perhaps your child would enjoy a sports-related book in the Matt Christopher series. Does he want to be a veterinarian? Go to the library and check out books on animals. If your child will only read a certain series of books, that's okay; at least he's reading. Don't turn up your nose at your child's choice of books; it can discourage reading.
- Magazines are often the method that gets reluctant readers on the page. Even magazines about video games require reading! Subscribe to magazines like

National Geographic World, Nickelodeon, Ranger Rick, or Your Big Backyard, and put the subscription in your child's name. Visit www.magazines.com or www.magsforless.com.

- Most children love comic books, which are a great way to ease into reading more traditional books. Many novels now come in comic book form and kids love them!
- If your child has a learning disability, get books on tape. If the topic interests him, he may want to go online or visit the library for more information. You may want to monitor your child while he is listening to a book and to know that he isn't just staring into space. Children can develop fluency and a better sight word vocabulary if they are tracking the words along with the reader's voice.
- Schedule a trip to your local library, and sign up for the summer reading program. This program may provide you and your child with needed structure and accountability. These programs usually reward children who read a certain number of books. Find out how many books your child is expected to read and set goals. If it's four books, then set attainable goals, such as 25 pages per week or one chapter per day. Take time to make regular visits to the library with your child, and remember to select books that interest him.
- Set a specific time for reading each day, and make it a priority. Instead of telling your child that he has to sit down and read for 30 minutes, schedule a family reading time. Take extra time to read aloud and discuss the story with your child. Ask both factual and inferential questions to assess his comprehension.
- Encourage not only reading, but writing as well. Help your child to create a family scrapbook of summer events using photos, postcards, and other memorabilia. Have him write a caption below each entry telling who, what, when, where, and why this event was special. What a great way to keep him writing and to have a wonderful keepsake from the summer of 2004!
- Have your child correspond with an author through snail mail or e-mail. Their addresses or emails are usually listed at the back of the book and if they are not, their fan club site can most likely be found online. Most writers make a point to responding.
- Use the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, Greece as a teaching opportunity. Have children research a country in which they are unfamiliar or one that want to know more about and then do some research online. Travel abroad right here in Washington by visiting a restaurant that services ethnic foods or tour an embassy or museum downtown. Write a letter to a favorite athlete; create a bar graph with medals won by each country, or compile information about a special story. Remember the Jamaican bobsled team?

- The summer is also a great time to hone keyboarding skills. Children as young as seven can begin getting familiar with the home row keys. Good keyboarding skills are a must for children with writing difficulties. It allows them to get their thoughts down on paper quickly so that they are able to use technology to proofread. Students can usually edit their mistakes more efficiently when they can see their ideas in an organized fashion on a computer screen as opposed to messy handwriting on paper. For a review of the best software for your needs visit www.superkids.com or www.reviewcorner.com.

DON'T FORGET MATH AND SCIENCE!

Math is often an overlooked part of summer learning, but one that can be easily enhanced. In order to be successful in math, students must have “number sense”. That means that they need to develop an understanding of mathematical concepts and the relationship between numbers, not just rote memory for facts. It is crucial for children to master the basics before going on to more advanced material. Fortunately, there are a multitude of fun and engaging math games and activities that help to develop number sense that can get almost any learner hooked, even the most reluctant one.

- Board games provide an opportunity for good old-fashioned fun with your child and help to build mathematical reasoning and computation skills. Games such as Connect Four, Chinese Checkers, Checkers and Battleship assist with reasoning and logical thinking skills as well as cause and effect relationships. Backgammon, Mastermind, Clue, and Chess exercise problem solving, deductive reasoning, and higher level critical thinking. Other board games such as Life, Monopoly, Monopoly Junior, Careers and Pay Day all incorporate money skills into their design.
- Did you know that 60% of parents give their children an allowance? Turn allowances into a great teaching tool by helping your child learn to budget, spend, and save his earned weekly allowance money. Visit www.kidsmoney.com for a host of activities, books, and ideas from other parents about what really works.
- Make math more meaningful to older children by getting them involved in a simulated online stock market game. Kids are given \$100,000 of virtual cash and learn how to invest their money based on research and current market trends. These games teach a multitude of math skills and the value of saving and investing. Visit http://www.msmoney.com/2001/12/14/investing_games_for_kids.htm for a listing of various games.

- Are you planning to travel to your vacation destination by car this summer? If so, incorporate math into your trip. Travel time will go by quicker and kids will practice math skills if you play counting games such as “Count the Cows”. Each child counts the number of cows they see on their side of the car, but if they pass a cemetery, they lose all their cows and have to start over. The person with the highest number at the end of your trip wins. See the website www.momsminivan.com for lots of fun driving games.
- Utilize free online math games to peak your child’s interest in learning basic facts. Break up the monotony of flashcards with interactive games such as those on www.multiplication.com or www.funbrain.com. Most children need to learn through a multisensory approach, meaning that information must be given through auditory, visual, and hands-on approaches. Check out reviews of math software at www.superkids.com for the best program for your child.

Giving kids a break this summer is essential; however, learning should not be lost. Learning can be fun and engaging if you focus instruction on your child’s interests. It’s also crucial to set goals and stick to them. At the beginning of the summer, decide with your child what goals you both want to accomplish. Set up a daily or weekly schedule so that learning is built into the day, just like gymnastics or any other activity. Workbooks, such as the Bridge series, purchased at any bookstore or teacher’s store in the area provide children with consistent reinforcement in all major subjects.

As the director of a local tutoring agency, Educational Connections, I often get calls from parents who want to cram two months worth of experiences into two weeks at the end of the summer in order to get their child ready for the fall. It is really much easier to plan your course in June and stick to it. If you need more structure, a tutor may be the way to go. A professional tutor can assess a student’s strengths and weaknesses and develop a plan for the summer months. Weekly or biweekly sessions should contain the bulk of instruction, but fun follow-up family games or assignments can be left behind if parents wish to supplement lessons. Regardless of the approach you take this summer, the main objective is to enjoy learning!

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