

Keeping kids' minds sharp during summer break

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School is out for the summer, but with parents' help, informal summer learning can be "in" with kids. Simple, low-cost steps like turning off the TV and visiting the local public library or nature center can introduce children to new ideas and interests that will keep their minds active and engaged when they away from the classroom.

Research from the Center for Summer Learning at The Johns Hopkins University shows that teachers spend a good deal of time in the fall re-teaching skills that were lost during the summer. Students fall an average of almost 2.6 months behind in math skills, but for low-income children, the slide in reading is particularly harmful: They fall behind an average of two months in reading while their middle- income peers tend to make slight gains.

By fifth grade, low-income children can be as much as 2.5 years behind in reading. And a recent study of Baltimore students by Johns Hopkins researchers showed that 65 percent of the achievement gap between poor and affluent children can be explained by unequal summer learning experiences during the elementary school years.

Fairchild encourages parents to make the most of children's summer vacation with the following suggestions:

-- There are high-quality summer camps and programs in almost every price range. Camps offered by schools, recreation centers, universities, and community-based organizations often have an educational or

enrichment focus.

-- Visit your local public library. Find out what interests your child and select books on that subject. Participate in free library summer programs and make time to read every day.

-- Find out what your child will be learning during the next school year by talking with teachers at that grade level. Preview concepts and materials over the summer.

-- Take educational trips, which can be low-cost visits to parks, museums, zoos and nature centers. When planning vacations, consider those with educational themes.

-- Practice math every day. A trip to the grocery store is an opportunity to review math skills. Cooking is a chance to learn fractions. Measure items around the house or yard, track daily temperatures. Every day experiences can be fun and interesting, while giving kids opportunities to learn the skills they need.

-- Get outside and play. Intense physical activity programs have positive effects on academic achievement, including increased concentration; improved mathematics, reading, and writing test scores; and reduced disruptive behavior.

-- Do good deeds. Students learn better and "act out" less when they engage in activities that aid in their social- emotional development, such as community service.

-- Keep a schedule over the summer and help kids stay in daily routines.

-- Limit time with TV and video games, just as you do during the school year. It always makes sense to provide structure and limits. The key is

providing a balance and keeping kids engaged.

Source: Johns Hopkins University

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