

Structured school days can keep kids healthy. How can we maintain it over school holidays?

December 27 2022, by Amanda Watson, Carol Maher and Tim Olds



Credit: Mary Taylor from Pexels

Every parent knows kids spend their time differently when they're on holidays. Our new research found out just how differently.

During the school term, [kids](#) get up around 7am, get into their uniforms, make their way to school, eat food from their lunchboxes or canteens, play at recess and lunch, have PE lessons, sit and get bored or excited in class, and then head home. Their day is highly structured.

However during [school holidays](#), all this goes out the window. Our [new research](#) shows in the summer holidays, kids are getting less [physical activity](#), more screentime, and eating more junk food and less fruit than they do during term time.

So what can families do to counter this?

What our research found

We asked 358 children aged nine to 11 years from 24 primary schools across Adelaide to wear an activity band for four weeks across the school year and one week during the summer holidays. At the same time, we asked the children to tell us about the activities they did and what they ate.

From the activity band data, we found during the summer holidays, kids sit for an extra 27 minutes, and spend 12 minutes less doing physical activity. From asking the kids about the activities they did, we found kids get 73 minutes more screen time each day, they spend an extra 22 minutes in cars, buses and trains, and 23 more minutes eating or grooming. They also spend an extra 16 minutes just chilling (sitting listening to music or doing nothing).

These findings mean their overall energy expenditure is about 13% lower. We also found kids' diet quality is lower—more [junk food](#) and about half a serve less fruits each day than in school time.

Why does it matter?

More physical activity and less screen time are [linked](#) to better physical and [mental health](#), higher levels of fitness, better school grades, and lower risk of becoming overweight. Overweight and obesity in childhood can lead to an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes, problems sleeping, and [low self-esteem](#).

During the [school year](#) kids don't gain much weight, but they do in the [summer holidays](#). We found on average, all participating kids' weight increased six times faster during the summer holidays than during term time. In fact, if kids lived every day like they do when they're on summer holidays, they'd put on an extra 6 kilograms a year. Kids are also [losing fitness](#), and their [mental health](#) and [well-being](#) suffer over the summer holidays.

These effects are [worse](#) in children from poorer, less educated backgrounds, and kids who are [already overweight](#).

How can we maintain the benefits of kids being at school, during the holidays?

Some have called for shorter school holidays. But Australian summer holidays are quite short by [world standards](#). Parents in Australia might welcome the four weeks enjoyed by Singaporean students, and children the 14 weeks endured by parents in Egypt.

In the United States and Europe, many children go to summer camps in the summer holidays. These can be overnight camps, where kids stay overnight, or day camps where kids go home at the end of each day. The length of these camps [varies widely](#) and can be short (1 to 2 weeks), mid-length (3 to 5 weeks) or the full summer session (7 weeks or more).

Research has [shown](#) where kids go to a summer camp daily (Monday to Thursday) for six weeks over the summer, kids are more active, less stationary and eat healthier diets on the days they go to summer day camp, compared to the days when they stay at home. These camps may be residential or day camps, and may combine physical activity with specific learning activities, such as coding, art or drama.

Families may also try getting their kids outdoors. [Research](#) has shown kids are likely to be more active when they are outdoors. Families may also try getting their kids to do something physically active before allowing them [screen time](#)—this could even be doing chores like mopping the floor.

Families may try to add extra structure to their children's holiday days, but it's pretty hard to resist the opportunity to sleep in, snack and binge on Netflix and video games, when the content is precisely designed to keep kids watching.

Big problems need bold solutions—is it time for [school administrators](#) and policy makers to reconsider the length of the school holidays, or the lack of summer holiday programming, for the sake of our kids' health?

Summer holiday programming might come from a variety of organizations such as sports and activity clubs, schools, religious organizations, museums and art galleries, disability groups, as well as the private sector which also offers summer camps.

Some ways to get everyone out of the house and moving could include the family enjoying a day out at the zoo, going climbing at [Tree Climb], spending the day swimming and sliding at your local aquatic center, or spending time with the animals at [Hahndorf's Farm Barn](#).

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Provided by The Conversation

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