

June 2010

Help Your Kids Make the Most of Summer

If you start the season with good intentions (chores! books! fresh air!), only to find the kids camped out in front of YouTube, read this wise advice

By Charlotte Latvala

Every June, I have the best of intentions: I'm going to keep the kids on a schedule. They're going to do more chores and read more books. We're going to take a family bike ride or walk every day, preferably in the cool of the morning. We'll be closer than ever.

And by the time the Fourth of July rolls around, things have usually slid out of control. The kids are sleeping in way past breakfast, lounging in front of the TV (or YouTube), and texting the afternoons away. It usually starts with a soft-hearted moment on my part ("They need a break after the school year — I'll let them sleep in today"), but quickly turns into a pattern. And since I'm still busy — with work, laundry, etc. — I sidestep my guilt and let them veg.

It's a common problem. By the middle school years, kids are too old to play Monopoly or go to town camp all day, but not old enough to drive or have real summer jobs. Though children may beg for "free time," it's not in anyone's best interest to let them achieve total slackerdom. "Tweens and teens often believe they'd just love to have weeks of 'doing nothing,'" says Annie Fox, M.Ed., author of the *Middle School Confidential* series. "But the reality rarely matches the daydream. Kids get bored, and, like puppies, bored kids often get into stuff they shouldn't." They also fall behind academically (more on that later). And, to be honest, we parents often have unrealistic, Norman Rockwell-like notions about bonding with our kids; we put an awful lot of pressure on ourselves and our kids to get closer than we are during the busy school year, says Michael J. Bradley, Ed.D., author of *Yes, Your Teen Is Crazy: Loving Your Kid Without Losing Your Mind*. "Parents who approach summer with too many plans for bonding usually wind up feeling like they're in a Chevy Chase movie where every thing goes wrong." But there are realistic ways to sneak some structure, learning, and — yes — family time into the summer without feeling like a drill sergeant. Here, the smart strategies:

Get On the Same Page

Good intentions often fizzle because kids have one set of summer goals (say, making it to the next level in Halo 3) and parents have another goal for them (tackling all of Charles Dickens). Many struggles can be avoided, says Fox, if parents and kids sit down before school gets out to discuss what worked in the past and then brainstorm together. "Ask questions such as: 'What was the best day/week of last summer? Worst?'" says Fox. Point out that plans that worked were probably those that left kids and parents feeling good about themselves and one another ("I liked biking to the pool instead of your driving me"), and that those that didn't work left everyone crabby ("I resented the mess you made playing upstairs").

It helps to think of your kid's day like the food pyramid, suggests clinical child psychologist Joyce Cooper-Kahn, Ph.D., coauthor of *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning*. On the bottom are the essentials: hobbies, social time, brain work, and volunteer time; in the middle are exercise, outdoor time, and chores. Shoot for a few daily "servings" from each list — a total of about six hours altogether, says Cooper-Kahn. Then top off the pyramid with a limited

amount of video games and TV (more on setting limits later). Remember that some activities fall into more than one category — soccer practice is exercise, and it's social — and that even playing Wii can be physical. Your kid probably won't hit all the sections of the pyramid on any given day, and that's OK, says Cooper-Kahn. "You're looking for overall balance, which can take a few days," she says.

Step Up the Chores

Having jobs around the house sets expectations and gives kids a sense of accomplishment. "Summer is ideal for learning responsibility, because tweens and teens simply have more time," says Susan Kuczmarski, Ed.D., author of *The Sacred Flight of the Teenager: A Parent's Guide to Stepping Back and Letting Go*. Of course, not many kids volunteer to do chores, and sometimes we parents fall into the "it's easier to do it myself" trap.

To make sure that doesn't happen, give kids a choice so they can feel a sense of ownership, suggests Kuczmarski, and offer tasks that feel like new privileges. For instance, I let A.J., my 12-year-old, take over lawn duties last summer; he didn't do the neatest job, but was enthused about operating the electric lawn mower on his own.

Also give kids a choice about when they accomplish a chore, says Bradley; this appeals to their need for autonomy. "Imagine how you would react if your spouse said, 'Take out the trash, now!'" he says. A better approach: "It would help me a lot if you'd take out the trash. When do you think you can get it done?" You may have to give kids a time frame ("Garbage pickup is at noon, so the cans have to be out front by then"), but dole out as little direction as possible.

Of course, there's also something to be said for the occasional well-placed bribe. Says family physician Jill Grimes, M.D., a mom of two middle schoolers: "Whether it's a trip to the yogurt shop or a new sports accessory, you can use that as a carrot." And if one of Dr. Grimes's daughters asks, "Can I go to my friend's house today?" she replies, "Absolutely — as soon as your room is clean."

Another tip: Avoid what Bradley calls the "chain gang" chores — those jobs that, like moving a humongous pile of gravel from the front yard to the back, never feel done. "For kids this age, anything that can be finished in an hour is best," he says. "They're not built for delayed gratification."

Finally, remember to praise your kid to keep the good vibes going, advises Bradley. If he tidies the kitchen (though perhaps not perfectly), say, "It's such a pleasure to come into a clean kitchen. Thanks!"

Layer in Some Learning

First, the scary news: Kids can fall behind in school if they slack off in the summer. "It's hard to overstate the importance of summer learning," says Karl Alexander, Ph.D., a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins University who recently found that disadvantaged first graders who had fewer enriching summer experiences (going to museums, visiting libraries) were two and a half years behind their more advantaged and involved peers in reading by the end of fifth grade. By ninth grade, the gap widened to five years. Most learning loss happened over the summer, notes Alexander; during the school year, all the kids advanced at a similar rate.

You don't have to hire a pricey tutor to keep kids on track. You can promote reading with these tactics:

- **Let kids pick their own books:** Last summer, A.J. got hooked on *Maximum Ride*, an action-packed sci-fi series I never would have chosen for him. (My pick, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, probably would have languished under his bed.) Even if kids gravitate to books that seem to be too easy, encourage them to read what they want, says **Diane W. Frankenstein**, author of *Reading Together: Everything You Need to Know to Raise a Child Who Loves to Read* — they'll move on to more difficult books when they're ready. "Kids only read for story. If they can't engage with what they're reading, they won't stick with it," she says.

- **Revisit old favorites:** My 15-year-old daughter, Mathilda, has read the *Harry Potter* series so often she has sections of each book memorized, but that's OK, says **Frankenstein**: "It's like spending time with an old friend. Each time kids read an old favorite, they see something new."
- **Create a summer book club:** According to James S. Kim, Ed.D., assistant professor of education at Harvard, research shows that kids who discuss what they read actually comprehend more. And any summer learning — whether it's practicing the violin or reviewing math facts — is more fun with a buddy, says Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions*. "Set a weekly schedule with other parents, and rotate houses," she suggests.
- **Use technology to your advantage:** Websites and even YouTube can encourage reading — through videos of author interviews, for instance. Some great tween/teen sites: guysread.com (cool, boy-friendly picks), teenreads.com (tons of reviews and info on how to start a book club), and readergirlz.com (an online book community for teen girls that has a young-adult author in residence). Just be sure to monitor, as always, where your child clicks to on the Web.

Encourage Good Works

Help kids to explore volunteer opportunities, from spending a couple of hours helping out at the local rec center so they can have pool access later on to working at an animal shelter just because they love to. Look online at volunteermatch.org for local openings, or ask at your local community centers and houses of worship.

Amp Up the Family Time

"For many kids, bonding is usually the result of taking them out of their routine and creating an atmosphere where they have to rely on the family for friendship and fun," says Marybeth Hicks, author of *Bringing Up Geeks* and a mom of four. That doesn't mean you need to go on a two-week backpacking trip, she insists: "A few years ago, we'd head into the yard with a small DVD player and pop in a movie. It was our own version of a drive-in, and everyone loved it."

Also consider these other cool ideas for together time:

- **Take it outside:** Eating together is the ultimate way to bond, says Barbara Fiese, Ph.D., professor of human and community development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Fiese recently led a study that showed that tweens who ate regularly with their families had healthier weight levels and sleep patterns and a better quality of life. Why not eat alfresco one or two nights a week? Even the most cynical teens enjoy picnics; go to goodhousekeeping.com/picnics for ideas.
- **Get thee to a museum:** Chances are there's some undiscovered gem within a day's drive of your home. Find everything from military landmarks to offbeat museums (the Skateboard Museum, anyone?) on museumspot.com, where you can search for fun destinations by geographic area or subject matter.
- **Force the issue:** Teens may resist what they see as dorky family outings, but "indulging every 'I don't want to' teaches them they don't need to extend themselves to build relationships," says Hicks. Stand your ground.

Let Bedtime Slide (A Little)

During the summer, most kids consider sleeping late an inalienable right. But snoozing until lunchtime is a major mistake, says pediatric sleep specialist Jodi Mindell, Ph.D., author of *Take Charge of Your Child's Sleep: The All-in-One Resource for Solving Sleep Problems in Kids and Teens*. "Sleep is as important for tweens and teens as it is for younger kids," she says. Moving bedtime and wake-up time later in the summer is fine — but don't let them sleep much past 9:30, even on weekends, or you'll throw off their natural body clock. To get kids moving, schedule activities such as swim practice for A.M. hours, advises Mindell.

And remember: No electronics in your kid's bedroom; they're simply too stimulating to promote good sleep. "And the bright light suppresses the production of melatonin, a sleep hormone," says Mindell.

Make Peace with Electronics

A few times each summer, I threaten to toss the television out the window because I can't stand my kids' zombie-like stares another minute. Knowing that research shows that TV and video games contribute to weight gain only adds to my discomfort level.

However, I'm also savvy enough to know that electronic entertainment is here to stay — and the American Academy of Pediatrics-approved number for kids' daily screen time (two hours) often seems like very wishful thinking. (I'll admit that on days when I'm busy, a Guitar Hero marathon can feel like a blessing — the house is quiet! There's no bickering!)

Still, experts recommend hammering out summer rules (say, no screen time before 3 p.m., or no more than two or three hours per one-day period) and sticking to them. "If it seems like my kids are slacking, I have them keep a log of how much time they spend playing," says Dr. Grimes, "and then review it with them. I reward compliance with something like a trip to one of their favorite restaurants."

Or, says Bradley, use the cell phone company's "rollover minutes" concept. "You all agree on a reasonable amount of video game time per day: say, two hours," he says. "If they stop after 90 minutes, then they can have half an hour extra the next day." The beauty of the plan, he adds, is that kids get some decision-making power, which helps them buy into the program.

"The crucial thing is to balance electronic entertainment with doses of fresh air and physical activity," says Hicks. One idea that's worked for her: "I've had the kids earn screen time by reading — a half hour with a book buys a half hour online." You can do the same with outdoor exercise; once kids are pushed outside, they usually find things to do. (Softball? Frisbee? Who knew?) And maybe — just maybe — they'll find that there's more to summer than Halo 3.