

Summer Slide

Ah, the summer vacation at last! For some children it's a much anticipated time of exciting vacations, fun lessons and team sports. For others though, without all the enriching summertime opportunities, the break can lead to an academic setback.

We call it the "summer slide" and research tells us that all students experience learning losses during summer months. Studies show that the amount of loss varies significantly by grade, subject and family income. On average, studies show that children from low-income families lose close to three months of grade-level equivalency during the summer break every year, compared to an average of one month lost by middle-income children when we combine performances in both reading and math. It seems that children from some families are more likely to go to the library and take books home, visit museums, attend concerts or engage in organized sports activities and lessons. Overall these children have a variety of learning experiences consistently built into their summertime break. Let's help to close the gap!

As a parent, you can help your children experience summer gain rather than loss. Summer vacation can be a great time for all kinds of learning and fun enriching experiences often at little or no cost. It's important to be realistic! Communicate to ensure that all family members are in the loop with knowledge about work schedules, timelines, budgets, interests and preferred activities. A good place to start is locally.

Check out the activities at your nearest Ontario Early Years Centre if your children are age six and under. Their website will highlight playgroup hours and locations. Libraries are a popular spot and have packed schedules of events and activities suitable for all ages. In addition to planned activities, children can browse websites and borrow quality books. The Parks and Recreation Department has an activity guide that is an excellent source of information on playgrounds, summer camps, lessons and swimming pool locations. Conservation Authorities are helpful with information about visiting conservation areas for hikes that may generate interests that can be researched later on. Newspapers and local radio programs can keep you posted on the current events in your community.

Look for ways to build reading and writing into your child's everyday activities. Try watching TV with the sound turned off and the closed captioning on, or ask your child to read aloud the instructions to play a new game. Involve children in writing grocery lists by searching for foods in print-rich flyers. Read recipes together, write e-mails to relatives, pick up post cards on your day trips and write captions under photos of all your summer adventures. Dust off the board games and introduce some card games too.

Dollar Stores are full of inexpensive materials that will motivate the reluctant reader or writer. Who can resist a coiled notepad in the shape of a silly cow, a lap sized white board or a funky scrapbook? Encourage children to choose the writing materials and books they are most interested in. Let your children "catch" you engaging in reading and writing also. Children benefit from role models.

Many children enjoy competition. Create a family challenge with incentives and rewards for effort. If the focus is on reading for example, make it fun and achievable by allowing a full range of reading materials including comics, graphic novels, magazines, newspapers, maps, flyers and websites. Motivate your children and encourage participation by allowing them to set the "rules". Reward them with valuable time spent together doing something special instead of costly material rewards. They can create a chart, checklist or graph to keep track of the minutes spent reading. Celebrate small successes along the way and keep it fun.

To become skilled at almost any activity we need to practice, practice, and practice! The more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary and comprehension skills and the more likely they will develop a love affair with books. A summer loss of three months will accumulate, adding up to a large gap as children move through the grades. Help your children get their hands on some reading material even if it's checking out the flyers and catalogues that come in the mail. Get to the library, the book store or swap books with a friend.

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