

Summer – A Time to Learn New Skills

The summer holidays provide time to have fun and take a break from the daily routine of school. However, research has shown that most students have a learning loss over the summer and that it can take up to two months to catch up when they get back to school. Children with special needs face additional challenges and the loss of learning can be even greater.

Including fun learning activities in the summer will help children to maintain and boost their learning. In addition, everything is a bit slower in the summer and there is more time to learn new skills and build your child's independence.

Summer learning can include important academic skills such as reading, writing and math, and is also an opportunity to work on communication skills, independence, responsibility and self advocacy.

Reading and Writing

Many of us have the time to catch up on our reading during the summer. Lounging in a chair at the beach or in the backyard with a good book is one of the pleasures of summer. Many children and youth also spend lots of times reading over the summer. However, other children, especially those that struggle with reading want to avoid reading and have no interest in books. Parents may have to "sneak" reading activities into the daily activities.

Graphic novels and magazines can be more appealing as there is less reading required and the topic may be of greater interest to the child. Whether it is books, comics or short articles, successful reading programs need the active participation of adults. You can support your child by helping them to find reading materials that are at their reading level and that

reflect their interests. Research in promotion of boys' literacy has found that boys may be more willing to read instruction manuals, sports stories, non-fiction, joke books or research on the internet.

In addition to helping the child select the reading material, the parent can boost literacy skills by monitoring their comprehension. Ask questions and have the child describe what they are reading in their own words. If you are reading a book together, stop and ask the child to predict what will happen next, or how the character might be feeling. If there are new words or topic specific vocabulary talk about the meaning of the words, or look them up in the dictionary. Making sure the child understands what they are reading will boost their literacy skills.

There are many fun activities that can be used to boost literacy. Regular trips to the library provides lots of choices in reading materials. Many libraries also hold regular activities for young children and bring in guests, such as clowns or authors, to focus on particular books or genres. For older children the library may run a reward program or contest for the most books read over the summer. At home, you can also offer rewards for reading activities or organize a contest with other children.

Cooking is a great activity to work on literacy, math and teamwork skills. Reading a recipe, finding and measuring the ingredients and following the cooking directions will all help to boost literacy skills. Word games, such as I-Spy, rhyming games, songs with repetitive refrains, or spelling contests all help to build oral language skills that support literacy.

The computer can also be a good source of games that promote language skills, and there are many downloadable APPs and games that will help your child maintain and boost reading skills.

During the summer there are less opportunities for children to write and practise their handwriting or develop their creative writing skills. Encourage your child to write a story or make a book. Suggest they keep a journal, or write a blog, describing their summer activities or their special interest. Creating a scrapbook or a family newsletter will encourage their creativity and promote writing skills.

There are lots of everyday activities to write words and practise spelling, including making shopping lists, copying recipes to share, taking a phone message, or using a calendar to record appointments or special outings. A computer or a cell phone can also be used for many of these activities.

Math

Test score results for students in Ontario have shown that many children are struggling in math. Math scores from the Education Quality and Accountability Office testing of students in Grade 3, 6 and 9 are not improving and there is serious concern about the math skills of children and youth. In addition, research has shown that math skills decline over the summer break.

For students with special needs it is important that there are lots of opportunities over the summer to practise and use their math skills. One of the easiest and fun ways to include math at home is by playing games. Many board games require counting skills, matching skills or simple calculations. Popular games include Snakes and Ladders, Bingo, Connect Four and Monopoly. For students with fine motor skill challenges the games can provide an opportunity to build their skills, or many games come in different formats. For example, Snakes and Ladders can be played on large floor mats, with a three dimensional board or on the computer.

Cooking together to make supper or bake a special treat requires math skills including measuring, counting, timing and

calculations for doubling or halving recipes. For the sports fan, statistics are an important part of the game. Children can be involved in the record keeping, counting shots, strikes, goals or hits. The serious sports fanatic may follow their favourite player over the season and track their performance against league record holders.

Money skills are an important for children and you can provide lots of opportunities for handling money and making change when out shopping or in a restaurant. Ordering and paying for their own ice cream provides for practice at talking to store staff, paying cash and checking the change. At the restaurant, provide a maximum budget per child, or for the family and have them work out what they can afford to eat Lemonade stands are a summer tradition that provides lots of math opportunities, from measuring and counting as they prepare the drinks, to making change and counting the profit. Older children may like to organize a small fund raiser, like a garage sale or muffin morning, to make money they can donate to a favourite cause.

Communication

Some children with special needs have difficulty with communication. They may have difficulty projecting their voice, or take a long time to complete their words and sentences. A few may require Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC) devices. Summer, and the slower pace, provides many opportunities to practice communication skills or to try communicating in new situations. Many AAC users are reluctant to use their devices in public and rely on family members or other people to speak for them.

To help your child become more independent in their communication you may need to change the responses of family and friends. This means giving the child much longer to speak or communicate before providing help. If you become impatient, and start filling in the words or speaking on their behalf, the child may give up. In order to change the dynamic you need

to slow down and stop, or delay your response.

The child also needs opportunities to practise communicating with other people. Daily life provides lots of opportunities including ordering in restaurants, making purchases in stores, and making phone calls or conversation with friends and family. Providing the opportunities, and encouraging communication, will lead to improvements and increased self confidence.

Independence and Responsibility

One of the primary goals of parents is to raise children to be independent adults. For children with special needs there may be additional challenges or limitations on independence, but each person needs to be as independent as possible. The process of developing independence takes many years and starts with small steps.

Over the summer consider one or two areas where your child can become more independent. It could be a simple task related to dressing or self care, or a big challenge like using the bus. Start by thinking about the things you do for your child and consider whether it is something they could do for themselves.

Depending on the child, they could prepare their own breakfast, or clear the table. An older child could make the call to arrange a play date, or find out about the opening hours of the library or a store. Teens and young adults could work on activities that prepare them for the future like using a washing machine, taking a bus or organizing a volunteer opportunity.

Personal safety and safety in the home are important skills to develop. Develop a plan of what the child will do in different situations and then provide the opportunity to practice. Maybe it is learning their address or phone number, or using a cell phone to call home. If the teen will be home alone, practice what to do if there is a knock at the door, an alarm goes off

or if the power goes out.

Many people with disabilities need people to help them with activities of daily living. They need to learn to direct someone to do things for them. Directing a support worker requires a lot of skill. Asking for help and explaining how to provide the help takes lots of practice. If your child has a support worker, consider how the child or teen can become more involved in planning activities, or directing their care.

Self Advocacy:

As the parent of a child with special needs we begin advocating for their needs soon after they are born or diagnosed. Over the years we become very knowledgeable about our child and what they need to be successful. We also learn about the health care and education system and about our rights in advocating for accessibility, equipment and support services.

Many of our children will need these same skills as adults. One of our jobs is to teach them how to advocate for themselves and allow them lots of opportunities to practice their skills. During the summer there is more time to work on self advocacy and use the skills in the community.

The young adult needs to know about their own disability and their needs. When you meet new instructors or attend an appointment encourage the child to talk about their condition and their needs. The more times they share information about themselves the more comfortable they will become at sharing the information.

Accessibility is a major concern to people who use wheelchairs, or other mobility equipment, or who have difficulty with walking. When you are planning an outing to a new location or event, involve your child in finding out about site accessibility. A teen can phone the local pool and find out what features the pool has for accessibility, including

power doors, graduated entry or lifts. Some of the research can be done on-line as many public facilities provide details of their accessibility, or photographs on their websites.

Your child may be prevented from taking part in an activity or attending a site because of an accessibility barrier. Talk to your child about how the situation could be fixed. Help them make a list of possible solutions. Looking at each solution help them identify who they need to talk to about the problem and the potential solution. Encourage the child to develop a plan and practise what they need to say or do to advocate for change.

Allow your child to take the lead and make a phone call or write a letter about their concern. They could also find out if they know anyone else who will be affected by the accessibility barrier and work with another person or small group to take their concern forward. Not every situation will get resolved quickly but each time your child advocates for themselves their skills and self confidence will improve.

Summer Success

Summer is a time for fun and relaxation, but with a little effort it can also be a great time for building academic skills, learning to be independent and responsible, and developing self advocacy skills.

Resources:

- **ConnectABILITY a website with** resources for individuals with developmental disabilities, and other special needs, that includes:
 - Visual Engine, for using pictures to create visual schedules or stories
 - Workshops on Math, Money and customer Service

Skills

- Communication
- Communicating for Fun Calendars, Parent and Child Activity Calendars
- Everyday Opportunities to Develop Communication Skills
- Supporting Children in their Steps to Independence
- APPS for people with special needs

Find the website at <http://www.connectability.ca>

▪ ***Easter Seals Ontario***

- Parent Resources: Summer Play Boosts Learning
 - Transition Tip Sheets for Parents: Developing Self Advocacy Skills

Find on the Easter Seals website at:

<http://www.easterseals.or/services/parent-resources>

▪ ***Me Read. No Way! A practical Guide to Improving Boy's Literacy Skills***

Available as a downloadable file at Ministry of Education:

Website:

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/merread/merread.pdf>

- **National Summer Learning Association** has lots of summer activities to promote learning, as well as summaries of related research.

Website can be found at: <http://www.summerlearning.org>