

Summer is Here! What Should You Do with the Kids?



By Emma Martin LaPlant, MA, LAMFT

For some kids and teens, summer is a glorious time of freedom, staying up late, and eating lots of junk food. But for others, the lack of structure and unpredictability of summer can fill them with a sense of dread and anxiety. Both structure and freedom are important for children's development. Routines and predictability help kids know what to expect and provide opportunities for them to develop their own internal rhythms and routines, and for those with anxiety, ADHD, and other mental health concerns, predictability can help prevent meltdowns and panic attacks.

However, overscheduling and structuring children's time can lead to kids feeling overwhelmed. Opportunities for freedom and imaginative play allow children to engage in creative problem-solving that is critical to their development no matter how old they are.

Parents often struggle to find the balance between creating a consistent summer schedule for their children while still allowing for downtime. The guidelines below can help parents strike that delicate balance between structure and freedom.

Maintain Your Schedule

Even without the early start time of school, it's important to keep bedtime, wake-up time, and mealtimes consistent between the school year and summer. Maintaining bedtime and mealtimes help children and teens feel more comfortable, which often leads to increased cooperation. And, if bedtime has stayed the same throughout the summer, families can avoid the inevitable meltdown at the beginning of the school year that comes from readjusting back to earlier bedtimes.

Keep It Healthy

Summer can sometimes mean lax rules around meals and snacking. If kids and teens are home all day, regularly scheduled meals can sometimes transform into snacking on junk food throughout the day. While indulging in a treat every now and then is definitely appropriate, maintaining a healthy diet is imperative. What we put into our bodies influences our mental health—junk food does not provide our bodies with the building blocks needed to make the neurotransmitters that keep our brain healthy and regulate our mood. Make sure your kid and teen is still eating their fruits and veggies along with complex carbs and healthy protein this summer.

Stay Active

In addition to eating healthy, it's important for your child or teen to continue to engage in physical activity throughout the summer. Some kids and many teenagers love to lounge around all day in their pajamas in the summertime. A lazy day every now and then is a great way to

take a break, but physical activity is necessary to release endorphins and other chemicals that help us feel content and boost our mood.

Limit Screen Time

Letting your kids and teens have free access to their tablets, computers, phones, and gaming systems can be tempting, especially when you're trying to get something done. However, boredom is critical for children's development. Boredom leads to creativity, develops grit and resilience, and allows children to practice problem-solving. If you're having a tough time getting your kids to do chores, try creating a screen time rewards system: For example, in order to get the Wi-Fi password, they need to wash the dishes; in order to get their phones, they need to fold their laundry.

Slow Down

While many children need to attend day camps or daycare during working hours, avoid overscheduling them with too many activities. Parents can sometimes view summer as a time for their kids to "catch up" by attending academic camps or tutoring, or to "gain a competitive edge" by participating in all kinds of enriching activities. And it is important for kids and teens to have new experiences and participate in activities and camps. However, it's just as important for families to spend time together, even if that looks like something simple like going for a walk around the block after dinner, going to one of the many free concerts in a park throughout the metro, or playing a board game together. Quality family time can make just as big an impact, if not more, on a child as robotics camp.

Make It Visual

Children and teens with autism or anxiety, or those who just like to organize this way, can benefit from having visual schedules. Elementary-aged children are often used to having a visual schedule of their day posted in their classroom, and teens and adolescents are familiar with predictable transitions between class periods during the school year. Continuing a visual schedule during the summer can ease the transitions at the beginning and end of the break.

Help Your Kids Connect to a Purpose

During the school year, children and teens know what their “job” is. Their job is to be a student. Their “job” is part of their identity, which helps children find and create purpose in their lives and connect to other people with similar purposes. During the summer, volunteering is a great option for helping kids and teens find meaning and purpose¹. Find a local food shelf, pick up trash in the park, or volunteer with the elderly. Volunteering together is also a great way to build lasting memories with your child.

Build Connections

It can be easy for kids, especially those without their own form of transportation, to stay home all day without any direct connection to their friends and peers. Humans thrive in relationship with others, and maintaining connections to their peers is critical to maintaining your child or teen’s well-being. While instant messaging and FaceTime are great inventions that help us stay in touch, nothing beats real, in-person connection. Facilitate play dates with your children and their friends and encourage your teen to walk or bike to their friend’s house for the afternoon.

Summer is all about balance. Find time to slow down and connect with your kids and teens while also providing them with structure so they know what to expect, and you’ll help them discover their purpose while smoothing their transitions into and out of the season.

Emma Martin LaPlant is a Headway coordinator for the school-based therapy team based in Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District 191 and West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan School District 197. She joined Headway in August 2016 and has worked in the human services field since 2011. Emma has previous experience working with children, adolescents, and their families in multiple different education venues, including The Annica Program, the Minnesota Autism Center and the Anova Center for Education. As a school-based coordinator, she collaborates with therapists, families, and school administration to provide supportive and nurturing environments for students to learn, heal, and grow.