

Fun Ways to Learn During the Summer

“All the world is a laboratory to the inquiring mind.”—Martin H. Fischer, American professor of physiology

Parents worry about it. Educators complain about it: Kids can fall behind academically during the summer. Most kids enjoy having a summer break from school, but many forget what they’ve learned. You can encourage your child to learn in the summer in fun ways—ways many wouldn’t even call learning. Consider these ideas.

Try it...

For all parents*

- Instead of buying flash cards and figuring out rote ways for kids to learn, think of “experiential learning,” which is where you learn by doing. When experiential learning is done well, most kids enjoy the process of learning, and some don’t even think it seems like learning at all. Take kids kite flying, canoeing, or take them to a hands-on museum. Expose them to experiences that stimulate their thinking and imagination.
- Take kids on walks. Before you do, check out nature books that include photos of local wildflowers, birds, bugs, trees, and wild animals. As you walk, be on the lookout for different aspects of nature.
- Help others. A key part of experiential learning is service learning, which is about serving others and then talking about your experience afterward. With her or his permission, plant flowers for an elderly neighbor. Bake cookies for someone who’s sick. Donate food to a food shelf. Afterward, discuss what went well and what could be improved.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Bring children to different places to stimulate learning. For example, take them to the beach and play in the sand. Take them to a playground on the other side of town. Take them to a different library than the one you usually visit. Take them to a children’s museum.
- Ask your librarian for picture book suggestions and check them out to read at home. See if your library has child activities and story times that you and your child can attend.
- Have children spend time with their grandparents. Often grandparents will involve kids in their passions, such as gardening, baking, or even cleaning out a closet (while the kids dress up in their clothes).

- Go bug hunting. Explore what the ants are doing in your neighborhood. Talk about which bugs to avoid (such as bees, wasps, and mosquitoes). Play with a ladybug.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Find day or overnight camps that get your child excited. Many camps now have specialties, such as horseback riding camp, canoeing camp, and archery camp. All these camps emphasize learning skills while having fun.
- Do simple science experiments with your kids. National Geographic Kids has lots of free ideas for science experiments, recipes, and more at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/kids/activities/>.
- Sign up for a family activity through your parks and recreation department, community education program, or nature center. Many offer one-time, stimulating activities, such as family cooking, an evening of looking at the stars, family hiking, and more. Have fun while you learn something new together.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Find more challenging and stimulating service projects for kids. Many congregations offer work camps and mission projects where kids take a trip for a weekend or a week and help others, doing things like painting, repairing homes, and so on. Habitat for Humanity allows kids who are ages 13 and up to volunteer.
- Ask your child if he or she has any summer homework. Many schools assign a book or research project for kids to do over the summer, and many kids don't tell their parents about these projects until the day before school starts. Create a plan to get the work done gradually over the summer.
- Consider having a playful summer reading competition. Ask your child to choose a certain number of books he or she is excited about. Check out two copies from the library—one for you and one for your child. See who can read the most books first, but avoid setting up a stiff competition where your child may want to skim the book instead of reading it. At the end, reward the winner, for example, with a trip for ice cream or a \$5 gift certificate to his or her favorite store.
- Take occasional family outings that expand everyone's perspective. See what the communities around you have to offer. For example, Darwin, Minnesota, has the largest twine ball in the world. Visit places like these and see what else you can learn.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Encourage teens to find internships and apprenticeships in areas that interest them, such as auto mechanics, photography, videography, soccer coaching, and so on. These types of experiences are not only great for their high-school resume, but give teens valuable hands-on learning experiences.
- If your teenager is working to earn money at a job he or she isn't thrilled about, encourage your teenager to also find something that excites him or her, such as learning new riffs on the drums, learning to cook Japanese food, riding a unicycle, reading a fascinating book, or renting episodes of NOVA.
- Encourage teenagers to think creatively about their technology skills and how they can help others with the skills they have. For more ideas, see http://www.parentingteensonline.com/article/show/title/Teen_Online_Entrepreneurs

- Continue to serve others as a family and encourage your teenager to join in. Help a grandparent with yard work. Serve a meal to the homeless through a soup kitchen. Help a neighbor weed a garden. Helping others teaches you a lot about working with others, deepening your skills, and making a difference.
- Talk about current events. Learn more about a specific current event that interests family members and discuss it at a deeper level.

* *Suggestions from Youth Community Connections: Minnesota Partners for Healthy Youth Development, www.youthcommunityconnections.org.*
