



Keep kids engaged to avoid summer learning loss

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If an investment is expected to depreciate by 30 percent in its first year and experience compounding losses every year thereafter, it's probably not a sound venture.

But that's what happens with children's education every summer.

While school is out, kids can lose up to two to three months of the skills they learned in the classroom that year.

"At the beginning of the school year, teachers need to spend the first five to six weeks reviewing material they saw the year before. We invest for nine months and then let those gains slip away. It's a vicious cycle," said Matthew Boulay, founder of the National Summer Learning Association.

While early learning depends on different moving parts, the association focuses solely on highlighting research and solutions to summer learning loss, often referred to as the "summer slide."

And while summer slide disproportionately affects low-income families who can't afford high-quality summer camps that build on the reading and math skills learned in the classroom, all kids are at risk.

The nation's report card, recently published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), revealed that just 37 percent of the nation's fourth-graders from both public and private schools are proficient readers.

The score has remained stagnant for the past 10 years.

“The research is crystal clear: Summer learning loss drags down achievement. It’s not so much that it’s one summer — it’s summer after summer. We’re never going to close the achievement gap unless we deal forthrightly with summer learning loss,” Boulay said.

And because younger children aren’t yet equipped to retain as much new information for as long as older kids, for them, summer slide is steepest.

According to the association, summer learning loss during elementary school accounts for two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading between low-income children and their middle-income peers by ninth grade.

On top of lack of access to high-quality summer programs due to cost, transportation or availability, kids — especially those from low-income families — may not have age-appropriate books in the home or have opportunities for the breadth of social interaction that comes with being in school.

“Summer is the most unequal time of the year. There can be a sense of isolation for many kids. They might be home indoors while parents work because of inadequate supervision to be outside interacting with the world,” he said.

Although policy has yet to catch up, many school districts and communities are bridging summer learning gaps through partnerships and initiatives that engage families to keep summer slide at bay. The more families learn about summer slide, the more they’re willing to address it.

Boulay says summer learning shouldn’t feel punitive like summer school might, and there are lots of fun ways to keep learning while out of school.

In recent years, summer book reading challenges have gained popularity and can be accessed online, for instance. The key is to keep up good habits often enforced more closely during the school year, like reading daily.

“There’s an upside in summer learning. So many of the constraints in schools, like standardized testing, aren’t present in the summer. There are more opportunities for communities to experiment with new curriculum,” he said.

What parents can do to combat summer learning loss:

Find summer learning challenges and register your children. Some school districts offer them at the county level, libraries are often great places to find them, and some national organizations offer them, including Brightly's, Scholastic and Common Sense Media.

Find out what your school district is doing to combat summer slide and join in.

For educational online games check out: pbskids.org, sesamestreet.org, and learninggamesforkids.com.

Book Adventure motivates kids to read by allowing kids in grades K-8 to search for books, read them offline and complete a quiz on what they've read to earn prizes.

Boulay suggests that parents check in with their child's teacher before they check out for summer. Many have summer learning packets to share, and are able to point to local summer programs, resources and more.

The local library offers programs that make learning fun, and activities like arts and crafts count. Also, make visits a habit to keep up with new books and learning materials in the home.

Check out the museums nearest you. They often offer free summer programs for kids and families.

Stock the home with books, worksheets and puzzles.

Read every day.

Eat healthily. Visit the food bank map to find one near you.

Stay active. Some kids experience weight gains due to inactivity over the summer.

Play with numbers.

Limit screen time.

Organize play dates.

Visit the National Summer Learning Association site to find a summer learning program, and more on the summer slide.

When looking for a summer camp, Boulay has some tips:

Ask about learning objectives. Do they set academic goals based on reading or math proficiency? Is there a mention of learning outcomes?

Find a camp with a structured curriculum and a staff that is trained, professional and supported.

Quality camps can include non-academic activities too, like swimming or team sports. Active kids are engaged kids, and engaged kids are better learners, he says.

Ask about scholarships. Many summer camps offer them.

Check with nonprofit organizations like The Boys and Girls Club, The YMCA and The Salvation Army for free or low-cost summer programming.

This story comes from a partnership between the Sarasota Herald-Tribune and The Patterson Foundation to cover issues surrounding the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. More than 300 communities around the country are part of the campaign, which is an effort to have all children reading at grade level by the end of third grade.