

## For Families



# Make It a Fun, Productive Summer



**June/July  
2022**

INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

A mostly normal school year came to a close and a new back-to-normal school year will start in the fall. For many students and families, it is a relief to regain this sense of routine. As we readjust, the transition of the summer months is a good time to prepare for what we hope will be a typical and beneficial school experience for children and teens.

### **Take a breath, relax and enjoy your vacation.**

First, remember to allow and plan for family fun time. Also, encourage self-directed down time for children and teens. This is unplanned room in the summer schedule where they can do whatever they want or nothing at all.

Removing expectations of academics and activities can also remove stress that may contribute to mental health issues. It has become clear that stress and anxiety are impacting the mental health of young people at an alarming rate.

“Childhood anxiety and depression can be linked to a high-pressure environment and not feeling in control of one’s life and circumstances. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that anxiety and depression are a major concern for teens and that academics are a top stressor. Parents can help to reduce this pressure-cooker environment by prioritizing self-directed activities over structured, school-like ones. Summertime can be a great place to start.

Rather than continuing a schooled schedule of structured camps, adult-led enrichment activities, and academic catch-up, parents can use summertime to grant their children true freedom and agency. Let them be kids, with wide open days to fill as they choose, pursuing their own interests.” <https://fee.org/articles/the-value-of-a-self-directed-summer-for-kids/>

The American Academy of Pediatrics has declared this mental health crisis a national emergency: “This worsening crisis in child and adolescent mental health is inextricably tied to the stress brought on by COVID-19...and represents an acceleration of trends observed prior to 2020.” <https://bit.ly/3EDk0Ql>

### **Plan activities — or don’t.**

The key to a productive, non-active summer is to do something. A whole summer of screen time may be counter productive. Excessive social media use has been linked to increased anxiety and depression. While some children won’t have the means or the environment to explore and play freely, it is important to listen to what children say they want.

Harvard Medical School has the following tips for parents who want to help their children plan their time and manage their anxiety:

**Create rituals of communication and safe spaces to talk.** . It's easy to lose connection with our children, especially our teens. Make time to talk during rides to school, family dinner, family game night or before bed.

**Make sure your child has downtime.** Doing things we enjoy and disconnecting from high-pressure situations is critical — and not just for kids.

**Encourage healthy media habits.** Kids love their devices, which help them connect with friends, but they have been found to contribute to mental health problems. Parents can help by talking to their kids about their online activity and setting limits.

**Make sure your child is getting enough sleep and exercise.** Both are important for mental health and physical health. Even short bursts of exercise can lessen anxiety.

**Keep in touch with teachers, coaches, and other adults in your child's life.** Educators and coaches play an important role in our kids' lives. They have information about your child that you need, and they play an important supportive role. Opening lines of communication with them can make a difference.

**Make your home a judgement-free safe haven.** Parents should have expectations about behavior and grades, but they should be judgment-free, and kids should know they are loved. Try to listen more than you talk and be empathetic and forgiving.

**Pay attention to your own mental health and model self-care.** Children pay more attention to what parents do than what they say. If you are struggling with anxiety or depression and aren't doing anything about it, they may get the wrong message.

### **What about academics?**

Summer learning loss — the knowledge loss during summer break — was a serious concern for parents and educators before the pandemic. Studies showed that, on average, students' achievement scores declined over summer vacation by one month's worth of school-year learning. Combined with learning gaps during COVID, students may be further behind in their educational progress than they should be.

Students can spend some time catching up this summer or, at the very least, they can prevent further learning loss. There are enrichment activities, often at no or low-cost, in many communities. First, check with your school.

Reading is an important and effective way to increase academic gains. Many public libraries have incentive-based reading programs for kids and teens. Parents can also encourage reading by scheduling regular trips to the public library, bringing books on family outings to the park or beach, reading to young kids regularly, and modeling reading during dedicated quiet time at home.

Technology can also be a valuable tool if it's not overused. Check for educational apps for specific focus areas such as math skill practice and language instruction.