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Combine fun, learning to keep kids' minds active during summer

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Yipee! It's almost summer vacation.

But even when school is out, learning still will be very much in.

Summer vacation, educators say, is no time for parents to let their kids forget about academics. Research has shown that if you don't keep your child's brain working during this interlude, she could lose, on average, 2.6 months of grade-level equivalency in math skills and as much as a year's reading level.

The plunge is even more pronounced for children from low-income families, says Maria Antonia Piñon, director of the All Aboard Family Literacy Program at Miami's non-profit Institute for Child and Family Health,

So it's in your child's best interest to keep academically active. The good news? The brain can be challenged in a variety of ways that won't cost too much money or prompt teeth-gritting resistance from the kids.

Piñon is a big advocate of recreational reading, both by adults and kids.

"Children learn by imitation," she says. "If Mom or Dad reads, the child is going to follow suit. And if the child can't read, read to him. Any kind of learning, when attached to love, will create a habit."

What's more, summer can be a way to expose children to difficult subjects in a new way, says Anne Rambo, associate professor of family therapy at Nova Southeastern University and author of *I Know My Child Can Do Better!* (McGraw-Hill, \$9.99 in paper). Vacation is the perfect time for acquiring or building a passion, as well as for reviewing already-learned skills.

"Summer," Rambo adds "is a great chance to help the child become a more fully developed person."

Retaining what they learned -- and even building on it -- is not all about flash cards and workbooks, either.

"Everything in balance," says Debbie Mandel, a New York-based talk-show host and author who often writes about stress. "Children need to have fun over the summer and relax because they are overscheduled and face a great deal of academic, social and extracurricular pressure."

Mandel suggests incorporating a healthy dose of fun -- and a relaxed attitude -- into any summer academics. Focus on the child's specific interest, too. Does he like the outdoors? Plant a vegetable

garden, and use that as an opening to discuss nature. Is she into music? Encourage her to write original lyrics to a song, and then videotape her performing it. It's an excellent way to practice writing.

Here are other suggestions from experts to stop the summer brain drain:

- Look for a special-interest camp that will appeal to your child. But don't just rely on a brochure. Rambo suggests that parents visit the camp while it's in session. Talk to other children and parents. Ask: Is it really enriching or just fancy babysitting? Is it fun? How does my child react to it?
- Plan your summer trip with an educational theme. Headed for Disney World? Stop at the Kennedy Space Center. If you've already decided on a particular town, look up national parks nearby and take the kids on a ranger-led geological or historical tour. Have them read a book about where you're going before you leave.

From Harris Cooper, professor of psychology at Duke University: ``If you're still thinking about where to vacation, find out what your kids will be studying in the coming school year. For example, if the Constitution is in the curriculum, consider a trip to Philadelphia."

- Recruit your child to help plan a vacation. Have her prepare a budget for spending money, and ask for help plotting the trip on a map and estimating miles using the map key. This is a built-in math lesson.
- During the trip, play "I Spy" to search road signs for numbers, colors and geometric shapes. For older children, estimate and calculate the travel time to your destination.

"This helps kids see the math all around them," says Trena Wilkerson, associate professor of curriculum and instruction at Baylor University. ``Parents can also incorporate these kinds of math-related activities as they visit community resources, such as museums, zoos and even the park."

- Look for intellectually stimulating activities in your community that don't involve a classroom or workbook. Museums, zoos and other attractions usually offer educational programs as part of a tour or visit. Parks are also a great place for fun learning activities. Before spending time outdoors, a parent can encourage the family to learn about the area's wildlife. Use the Internet to look up native plants and animals, then check them off as you spot them during your visit.
- Read, read, read. While most schools have a summer-reading requirement, educators and child experts say it's better to go beyond the two or three books typically required. Stop by a bookstore during story hour. Sign up for a summer book club.

The Miami-Dade Public Library System's 2009 Summer Reading Program runs June 13 to July 25. Children, teens and adults can participate in weekly challenges and win prizes. To participate, children and teens must read a minimum of four hours a week and complete a weekly reading log.

In Broward, the libraries' summer program, presented by the Miami Dolphins, is scheduled for June 6 through Aug. 1, with a reading game, prizes, activities and performances throughout the county. To get started, children must visit their local library and sign up for a Summer Reading Game brochure. They must set personal reading goals, play the game for rewards along the way and win the chance to score grand prizes.

- Consider enrolling your child in an inexpensive continuing-education course at a local college.

Miami Dade College's School of Community Education has a week-long Science & Nature Camp for \$185. The college also has a variety of other classes, from SAT writing preparation to math reviews to phonics classes, all at reasonable prices.

- Teach your child how to keep statistics for summer sporting events like baseball. Kids can compute ERA, RBI and other percentages.
- Turn any activity at home into a teachable moment. For example, beading jewelry with a young child helps support pattern recognition and counting.
- Think of the kitchen as a math lab. Ask your child to help you cook and bake. The extra mess is well worth the effort of applying such math concepts as measuring and figuring out fractions. Make it a game, too, by asking: How many pints in a quart? Cinnamon is which country's major export?
- Turn your home into an international destination by using the Web. Research your family's heritage or a favorite foreign city.
- Use a trip to the store to help a young child practice counting or the recognition of shapes. Ask an older child to bake a cake and change the ratio of ingredients, then shop in the supermarket for the extras.
- Find a structured volunteer position for your older child in an area of interest. If, for instance, your high-school junior is considering law, ask an attorney friend if your teen can help out in the office (unpaid) several times a week.
- For older children, check out the free courses offered by hundreds of universities online. While you might not expect a ninth grader to understand everything, he may find some subjects very interesting. Some courses you can even download to an iPod using iTunes U.

Websites for these free courses:

<http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/home/home/index.htm>

www.youtube.com/edu

<http://academicearth.org/>

www.apple.com/education/mobile-learning/

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