

Reading, writing and running around

June 15, 2011

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School will soon be out for summer, but that doesn't mean the learning should stop.

"Summer slide," the brain-drain that occurs during the holiday months when kids are out of class, can be a problem, especially for those who struggle in school.

But for all children, it's a good idea to establish a new set of three Rs for the summer: Reading, writing and running around.

"The big thing is kids do need a break in the summer, but they should be surrounded with books all the time. But it needs to be positive," says Patrick Keyes, superintendent of education for student success in the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

"If children are younger, read to them! If they are older, get them reading and enjoying themselves! But also get them running outdoors and enjoying themselves that way, too!

"All the brain research tells us that's an absolutely vital part of human growth, and what I'd call spiritual growth."

Studies have found that the learning loss over the summer holidays can be equal to two months of the school year. It's especially true for children from low-income homes, who may not have the opportunity to go to camp or take part in other enriching activities during their time off.

The areas most likely to be affected are math and spelling, as well as reading.

There's even an [organization](#) that promotes awareness about this learning loss, and sets aside one day each June as "summer learning day."

In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama released a declaration for the day: "Like an athlete out of practice, a child who takes long breaks from learning can face academic setbacks . . . Learning loss can be especially pronounced among low-income children.

"Recent research suggests that unequal access to summer learning opportunities helps explain the achievement gap between low-income and affluent students.

"This gap ultimately means that low-income students may be less likely to graduate from high school or enrol in college."

He urged parents to try to find time to read interactively with children: "When possible, families should visit public libraries, tour museums and science centres, and explore the great outdoors. Parents can also encourage youth to keep a journal and to practise math skills through cooking and games.

"Even though summer has arrived, student learning needs do not take a vacation."

Experts agree that there's no need to print off mounds of worksheets or do math drills at the beach.

Local school boards often run programs for students that keep mind and body active through sports, games and fun activities designed to foster literacy and numeracy.

"Everyone needs a break," says Pat Stellick, the [Peel District School Board](#)'s elementary coordinating principal. "For families, with the change in routine, you are looking at the real-life application of things learned in school.

"Whether it's writing a postcard while on family vacation, or helping navigate looking at a map or reading signs — how much further is it to the Tim Horton's? — there are real-life ways to use literacy and numeracy," she says.

This sort of approach is far more engaging for kids than anything that would seem like summer homework.

Even conversations in the car or around the dinner table get synapses firing.

"Certainly as children grow, they have more opinions about things," says Stellick. "And the great thing about the long drive to a cottage or to Grandma's house is that you can debate what you think."

The Peel board runs some programs for preschool children and their parents at its hub schools and readiness centres during the summer. For students in Grades 7 and 8, there's Camp I Can, which focuses on literacy, helping with engagement and motivation and improving student confidence.

Teachers are also working on things such as instilling responsibility, self-regulation, a sense of citizenship and organizational skills. These can be emphasized through involvement in summer sports, such as playing soccer. "There's lots of value in that beyond the physical activity, Stellick says. Working together, developing teamwork, and problem-solving are all skills to be developed.

Each month, the Peel board releases a [list of activities](#) for parents to do every day with their children. There are great ideas there "to keep kids motivated and engaged, as well as to encourage a bond between parents and kids" she adds.

Drew McNaughton, a principal with the community education team at the [York Region District School Board](#), says the board offers free summer tutoring to small classes of children from grades 1 to 6.

"We understand the need to support our students and families, and we do understand there is a summer learning loss," McNaughton says.

His advice is to keep kids reading and writing. "Allow a lot of free writing time. It doesn't need to be overly technical."

Local public libraries often run summer reading reward clubs. The Toronto Public Library offers [Splash!](#) for kids.

While families should incorporate learning into summer activities, Keyes, of the Toronto Catholic board, says he's looking ahead to see how schools can take lessons from summer vacation.

"I think we're moving schools to more of an activity-based curriculum, in a way," he says. "Higher-level thinking and learning skills, you need those.

"I'd love to bring summer into the regular school day."