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Enjoying summer's hazy rays is just 4-year-old Tulia Phillips's style. Add bubbles -- perfection.

School's out but work is not

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Ah, summer! Lazy afternoons reading in the hammock. Picnics in the park. Sandcastles at the beach Anything is possible once the bell rings on the last day of school.

Or it would be if you hadn't blown half your vacation time staying home with the kids during cold and flu season and the other half taking them to Florida in March.

As welcome as the change in routine can be — show of hands, those who are going to miss quizzing their kids on spelling! — summer break usually leaves a vacuum where there was once a tidy childcare plan.

"While it's wonderful and fantastic if a family has the possibility to spend two months vacationing, that's just not the reality of the vast majority of Canadian families," says Don Giesbrecht, president of the Canadian Childcare Federation. "It's a big trick to balance the expectations of employers or customers (if you run your own business), and the needs of the children."

Unless you are among the minority of households where one parent stays home with the kids, or one parent is a teacher, the chances are you're looking at a massive gap between the nine weeks kids will be off school this summer and your two-to-four weeks of vacation time.

You're left to sew a patchwork of camps, family vacations and visits to grandma into a quilt of childcare. And the camps that parents rely on so heavily for childcare often wrap up at 4 p.m., not 6 o'clock as daycare often does.

Luckily, moms and dads are resourceful, says Nora Spinks, CEO of the Vanier Institute of the Family. "Parents today are getting more creative. The more connected you are in your community, the more it's possible to coordinate and cooperate with others."

She knows two families who have combined forces to minimize the number of weeks their kids are in costly day camps and maximize the their kids' unstructured play time.

The neighbouring households — each with two kids, ages four and six — are staggering their vacations to care for all four kids, and providing simple summer fun in the city this way.

“Over the course of the summer between the two moms and the two dads, they’ve got most of the summer covered,” says Spinks.

“I think attitude is a big part of it. It doesn’t mean that balancing work and family at any time of the year is particularly easy. But it’s summer, and summer in this country is short. You need to find ways to make the most of it and not over-program or over-complicate the reality.”

Candace Derickx, an Ottawa mom of two and step-mom of one, is looking forward to summer despite the fact she and her husband both run businesses, which are particularly busy in July and August. (He’s in the pool business and she sells school supplies at [Best Tools for Schools](#).)

“Summer is such a great time for kids. It’s a time to let go of routine. It’s nice to see them let go of that routine and have fun with it,” says Derickx, who also writes a blog called [See Mummy Juggle](#).

Her summer balancing act will be quite the juggle indeed.

“When my husband works through the day, I’ll be home with the kids. He gets home around 3:30. That’s when I’ll go to the warehouse for a few hours in the evenings. This way, we can avoid putting them in camp, which is really expensive.”

Many face the same challenges. Richard Caruso and his ex-wife had to get creative with plans for their daughter.

“Abby’s daycare didn’t have enough space to take her full time throughout the summer, but we were able to split one of the available spaces with another family, with our kids alternating weeks at daycare.”

In Abby’s off weeks, she’ll spend a week with each parent and the rest of them with different grandparents.

While the long stretch of summer vacation for kids takes great advantage of the short Canadian summer, it poses such a childcare conundrum and opportunity for kids to backslide on what they’ve learned that some groups advocate for different school schedules altogether.

It’s hard to say if Canadians would actually prefer a model where kids alternate 10 weeks of school with three weeks off, for instance, says Annie Kidder of [People for Education](#). “There’s some evidence that kids that come from less advantaged homes or families would have a somewhat greater possibility for success in school in that sort of schedule.”

It doesn’t mean kids should go to school all summer, she says. It’s just about making sure that an enriching summer is accessible to all children. “Right now, it certainly isn’t.

“We have to think, as a society, what our responsibility is for children, not just in the school year, but in the break in the summer, and we seem to not be able to figure out that part of it.

“Maybe this is the next frontier.”