



Thrive in 2025: Stop “Summer Slide”

Just because your child is off from school doesn't mean his mind should take a vacation.

By Jeannette Moninger

Brooke Schindler is psyched at the beginning of each new school year. "There's a special energy because the students are excited to learn new things," says the fourth-grade teacher at Franklin Elementary School, in Wausau, Wisconsin. But first, she has to spend valuable class time reviewing the material the kids learned in third grade. "It's as if their minds start to prune away the knowledge they didn't use over the summer," says Schindler.

She's not the only educator who feels that way. A Columbia University study estimates that elementary-school teachers spend up to eight weeks re-teaching what kids forgot over the break. This phenomenon is known as "summer slide."

"Think of the brain as a muscle," says Earl Martin Phalen, founder of [Summer Advantage USA](#), a nonprofit that provides enrichment programs for disadvantaged youths in Indianapolis, Indiana. "When you don't use it, you lose it."

Most experts aren't suggesting that summers filled with beach trips and picnics should go the way of daily gym. But let's be real: When the school calendars were created a century ago, kids needed July and August off so they could help out around the farm; today, the only farming most kids do is on FarmVille.

"Too many kids turn much of their summer into a video-game or Internet marathon," says Harris Cooper, Ph.D., chair of the psychology and neuro-science department at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina. "Summer's become a wasteland for them and a time when parents scurry to provide their children with mental stimulation."

The Problem

Research spanning decades suggests that too much R&R impedes learning. Children of all ages score lower on the same standardized reading, spelling, and mathematics tests in September than they do at the end of the previous school year. The dropoff is most dramatic in math: On average students lose two months' worth of skills in the subject, a fact that may help explain why U.S. students rank 25th among 30 developed countries in math literacy, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.



"If we want our kids to compete in the global marketplace, we must find ways to foster their academic growth during the summer," says Ron Fairchild, president and CEO of the Smarter Learning Group, a consulting firm that works to improve the quality of [education](#).

One potential fix, touted by President Obama, is to expand the number of days in the school year from the current 180 to 197 (the average for countries with the top student achievement levels, including Japan, South Korea, and Germany), a move that would add a month of class time and thus curtail the lazy days of summer. However, with cash-strapped schools already cutting programs right and left, most districts don't have the funds to cover the increased salaries and other costs associated with adding school days. Plus, the notion of abandoning the ingrained tradition of summer vacation -- a time for families to bond and relax together -- is hardly a popular initiative among parents or kids.

Nor should it be, say some experts. "Summer is a time for kids to explore and experience new things," says Phalen. He recommends enrichment programs (camps, library events, parks and recreation activities) as the optimal way to help kids hone skills, stay active, and keep their mind engaged. But not every community offers these, and both the cost and the logistics -- how can working parents transport their kids to and from such opportunities? -- keeps many kids at home. Only one out of four participates in a summer learning activity, according to a 2010 report by the nonprofit Afterschool Alliance.

What You Can Do

Whether or not your child attends a summer program, you can easily incorporate these mind-building activities into her break without eating up her precious downtime. Bonus: They're so much fun, she won't even know she's learning.

- **Raise a smart shopper.** Take your child along on your next supermarket run. Have her practice writing and spelling (by making the list), reading (by looking for items on store shelves), and math (by calculating how much change you should get if the groceries cost \$35 and you hand the cashier \$40).

- **Explore your community.** Discover how polar bears survive the summer heat at the local zoo, gaze at a planetarium's starlit ceiling, step back in time at a history museum, or perform cool experiments at a science center (save money by visiting these places on free or discounted community days). Discuss what you've seen at the exhibits, and then do some online research together at home so you can learn even more.
- **Get cooking.** The kitchen is a perfect place to sharpen your child's number skills. Young chefs can learn about fractions (show him that three eighths is less than one half, even though it sounds like more), measuring (16 ounces equals 1 pint), and sequencing (first you mix the batter, then you sprinkle in the chips, and finally you pour it into a baking tin).
- **Take an educational trip.** Who says a vacation can't involve learning? Try walking along Boston's Freedom Trail, visiting The Alamo in San Antonio, or viewing NASA's rockets up close at the Kennedy Space Center, in Florida. Can't travel far? Head to your state capitol or have your child complete a Junior Ranger program at the nearest National Park. Before you hit the road, show him how to study a map and determine the route and the distance.
- **Become a sports buff.** Your budding mathematician can learn to compute statistics -- batting and earned-run average, number of laps completed by a race car, shooting percentage in soccer -- whether she's watching her favorite team play or analyzing the results of her own Little League games.
- **Read up.** Many bookstores and public libraries sponsor summer initiatives that award prizes such as books, [toys](#), or gift certificates when a student completes ten books or reads for a certain number of hours. Grade-schoolers who participate in these initiatives boost their reading-achievement scores significantly during the summer, according to a July 2010 study from the Dominican University's Graduate School of Library and Information Science, in River Forest, Illinois.
- **Write on.** Buy a scrapbook or a diary so your child can capture her summer memories. Pick up some fun postcards when you travel and have her write messages to relatives and friends. Or connect her with a pen pal via Friendship by Mail (\$5 for a onetime list of pen pals; [friendship-by-mail.com](#)), International Pen Friends (\$25 per year; [ipf.net.au](#)), or A Girl's World (\$12 annual fee; [agirlsworld.com](#)).
- **Play games.** The next time you hear "I'm bored," take out Sum Swamp, Dino Math Tracks, or another age-appropriate board game that reinforces counting skills. Uno teaches the concept of greater than and less than. And while it's old-school, taking up



chess may be one of the best ways to stimulate your child's mind during the long layoff: Research shows that elementary students who play it score significantly higher on reading and math tests -- making it an excellent antidote to summer slide.

Is Year-Round Learning Better?



About 8,700 public elementary schools have switched to year-round schooling, in which the students attend alternating 45-day sessions followed by three-week breaks to relieve overcrowding. But this system has a side benefit: Because there's no summer vacation, the kids have less time to forget what they've learned.

Chicago Public Schools introduced a 12-month calendar in 2007 when Secretary of [Education](#) Arne Duncan was the district's chief executive. Two years later, a greater percentage of students in the pilot program met or exceeded state standards in reading and math than for the district as a whole. "Year-round schooling, extending the school year, and extending the school day can address problems like summer learning loss and offer students the time they need to be prepared to graduate from [high school](#) ready for success in college and careers," says Duncan.

Wondering if your child could benefit from a year-round schooling approach? Go to nea.org/tools/17057.htm to learn more about it.

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