



Navigating Parenthood

Charting the course of parenthood can sometimes feel like a wild ride. Here, some tips to keep you feeling sane.

From how to manage the freedom of summer months to dealing with the waiting list and more

Lazy Days of Summer

Managing your child's free time.

With spring in full bloom, New Yorkers can't help but fantasize about the approaching warm summer months. Summertime presents a much-needed reprieve from the hectic, pressured and exciting lives of New York City families. However, summertime is not as simple as one would hope. While summer life offers a temporary vacation from the demands of your child's school schedule, teacher conferences, play dates, after school activities, flu shots, ERB tests and strict bedtime rituals, it certainly presents its own complexities and challenges.

The summer dilemma is best defined by the ever-present question: What should we do with the children during the free, unstructured days of summer? What will we do without school? How will the kids keep up and what do they need to accomplish this summer? New York educators, psychologists and psychiatrists are flooded with such questions. Should we be preparing for next year (perhaps tutoring a bit)? Hiring a tennis coach? Or at least a swim instructor? After all, every child has to learn to swim. How about day camp, sleep-away camp or travel? It appears that parents feel guilty and uncomfortable letting summer be summer. A less-structured time filled with play, creative exploration, new friendships, sea shells, sunsets and sometimes even sunburns.

Many parents ask a critical question: How much free play time versus structured time is best for a child during the summer months? To answer this, each parent must consider both the universal and psychological virtues of play, as well as the individual needs of each child, his or her age, stage and character.

First and foremost, let's talk about play. Play is the most important vehicle through which our children grow and explore themselves and their world. "Let's play" is a very meaningful communication from any child. It is an innocent but direct expression of a child's wish to engage and connect with others and include them in his or her world of fantasy and imagination. The

world of play is rich in symbolism and promotes creativity, intellectual growth and early socialization skills. Never dismiss your children's request to play with them, even when you have heard the words "let's play" over and over again. Play defines and depicts the magic of the childhood years.

Many parents express concern that too much unstructured playtime will prevent their child from engaging in the more disciplined and constructive activities of summer, such as day camp or formal preparation for the upcoming school year. Here, balance and moderation are the key ingredients to healthy summer days. The school-age (nursery and early elementary school) child may crave and flourish from the more predictable and routine activities provided by day camps, athletic programs, music classes, etc. These activities often require the capacity

to separate. Some children separate from their parents with ease; others experience more anxiety and difficulty. Parents need to consider how their child separates and makes transitions to new environments, and how long a day is appropriate for that child. For some children, a half-day of summer camp is just perfect; other children clearly need more. One child may benefit from additional athletic activity after camp and/or on weekends. Others appear to need a day off from camp (and complete downtime) each week. Some children use their free time to challenge themselves academically (beyond their grade level) and seek enrichment. And children with specific learning differences may need to work on academic tasks at home or with a tutor to prepare for school in the fall. In each of these situations, it is essential to maintain a healthy balance.

Summer provides a wonderful time for your child to read for pleasure. Encourage your children to read books that they simply enjoy. This often includes books that they have read before

and/or books that appear "too easy" for them. This experience promotes both mastery and self-confidence. Have your child accompany you on an old-fashioned trip to the library. Choose your summer reading together and don't forget to get a book (or two) for yourself.

Summertime presents a unique opportunity for relaxed and extended family time. This applies both to the child's ability to see more of his or her parents (perhaps during their summer vacation time or on a long weekend), and his or her siblings who may have otherwise been off at school and involved in their own activities prior to the summer months. Family time

is undoubtedly the most important component of a child's sense of security, connectedness and belonging. Family time may involve long-awaited visits with grandparents and other extended family members.

Family time can be kept quite

simple. This applies to families who summer in the city, in the country or both. Try cooking together (even the inside barbecue will do), enjoy fresh and colorful summer foods, plant a garden, grow vegetables, watch the flowers blossom. Remember to count the stars in the sky, have endless ears of corn, try the two-wheeler again, take a walk on the beach or in the parks, swim, play in the sand and find your favorite ice cream parlor. On a rainy Sunday, build Lego's to the ceiling. These summer memories don't seem to fade, but rather become the foundation for wonderful stories passed on from generation to generation.

In this pressure-packed, fast-paced, ever-changing world, summer provides an oasis from it all. Summer living embraces the magic of childhood with warmth and excitement. Explore with your child, engage in their play, build that tall sand castle, knock it down if you wish and then build it again. Celebrate summer!

—Betsy Schur Levy, Ph.D.

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