



6-23-2014

Summer Fun with the Brain in Mind

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Recommended Citation

Desautels, Lori, "Summer Fun with the Brain in Mind" (2014). *Scholarship and Professional Work – Education*. 112.

https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/coe_papers/112

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Summer Fun with the Brain in Mind

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Summer months are typically designated as times for less structure, more pleasure, enjoying the outdoors, and free time. Sometimes, however, our brains feel discombobulated without the structure or schedules that guide us through the other ten months of the year. But whether we're in school, at home, the pool, the playground, or on vacation, we're always using our brains. The brain-compatible activities below are intended for parents to implement with children or adolescents to activate the joy of learning, decision-making, questioning, and playing with ideas during summer break and beyond.



These activities and strategies include storytelling, novelty, and questioning - strategies reflecting the natural ways that the brain learns, makes meaning from real-life experiences, and engages the prefrontal cortex in times of negative emotion or conflict. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that processes emotion and thought, and when activated, can lessen the fight-flight-freeze response.

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1. The Story Lady or Story Man

There is nothing more exciting than dressing up, donning an accent, and bringing a bag of books or homemade stories while ringing your own front doorbell. When my three children were little (and not always so young, as we kept this tradition for years), I dressed up as Mrs. Kit Kat, a funny little lady with an interesting foreign accent. She surprised my children with stories and facts -- about them! They could not believe how much I knew about their lives and interests. We shared much laughter, asked questions, and kept the mystery alive a couple of times a week with her witty, unexpected visits.

2. Meal-Time Scavenger Hunt

Our children have favorite movies, colors, habits, interests, books, etc. One evening a week, with each dinner course served, fold up and tuck away a clue on a post-it relating or hinting to the topic you chose about your child. This is very motivating and engaging because, as humans are pattern and novelty seekers, our brains love figuring out information based on clues or parts of a subject. We still do this today with our teenagers, and they love to guess while we are eating and laughing over some of the clues given. Regan's topic was her favorite author, Sarah's was her beloved stuffed animal "Carrots," and Andrew was always given clues about his favorite sports teams.

3. Letter of Advice for Parents

Conflicts over curfews, friends, boundaries, and activities (among other subjects) always appear and sometimes magnify in the heat of summer. If a disagreement or conflict looms between parents and adolescents, and neither

seems able to find a solution, go to your teen! There's nothing more satisfying than being sought after for advice. Directly and indirectly, you enlist the help of your adolescent's higher-level thought processes when you ask, "What can I do to resolve this?" or "Help me find a better plan that we all agree upon." He or she begins to feel valued and appreciated, moving from the brain's fight response into a "responder" response. If a conflict occurs, maybe parents and children can agree to write a story sharing each perspective, and then compare, ask questions, and talk after the heat of the moment has fled.

4. It's All About Me Day

Nothing is more critical to our well-being than feeling valued, capable, loved, felt, and heard. As a family, designate a day for one another, choosing and planning your child's or adolescent's favorite things! This is great modeling for children, as they too can show their appreciation for all you do and are. It doesn't have to cost money. The summer is full of opportunities to plan a meal or a field trip to a favorite location, to write a poem or story, or even post signs in the yard or neighborhood about the genius of this designated family member. Creating a picture folder, inviting a surprise visitor, or planning an outing that serves another is always an uplifting experience.

5. Upside Down and Backwards Day

We all become stuck in our ruts, structure, and lifestyles. They feel comfortable but not always enjoyable. On this day, everything changes: meals, locations, timing, and setting. Have a snow cone and vitamin for breakfast. Pack up your lunch and take it to a secluded or unusual area. Pull up or decorate different chairs for dinner, create invitations, design a sundae bar, dress up, decorate the dining room or kitchen, and eat late. Wear your clothes backwards. Make up your own language and talk this way all day long -- even in public. (Maybe begin every word with an S and end it with a T or P?) See what happens!

6. Creation Day

This activity is my favorite because, as parents or educators, it's a great way to warm up the brain for thinking outside the box. When our children awaken or there's a break in the day, bring out large paper bags with each child's name printed on the outside. Inside, they'll find random objects from junk drawers or closets at home, or nature objects from outdoors. Maybe a couple of bags are filled with some rocks, tree limbs, leaves, twigs, and flower petals. In a specific and agreed-upon amount of time, each person begins constructing his or her creation. Music can be playing, but talking is kept to a minimum during this creative time. The projects could be set aside and shared later that evening. Children might choose to write a story or poem about their construction, or they can just verbally share.

These brain-compatible activities are also great for any classroom as well as summer fun at home. And if you have any that would go well with this list, please add them in the comments section below.