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Summer Brain Drain: Encouraging Kids to Keep Learning During the Summer Holidays

As the school year comes to a close, thoughts of math and writing may be turning into visions of sleeping in, swimming and playing with friends in the sun. Teachers say it takes over a month to get kids re-focused on learning and academics when they return to school in the fall due to summer "brain drain." There are many things you can do to make sure kids have fun during their summer holiday while still preparing them for their return to the classroom when school resumes in September.

Limit TV. With no mental or physical stimulation, kids not only lose some of their brain power by lounging around in front of the television, but are also more likely to gain weight. So, limit your child's access to TV and video games and encourage them to get outside and get moving instead.

Go hiking. Hiking on local trails not only gets kids off the couch, but is also a great opportunity for them to discover an unexplored world of plant and wildlife that may exist close to your own neighborhood. This is an excellent way to teach children about different plants and animals, and if you don't already know yourself, you can learn together.

Encourage reading. The library has a wealth of information on the plants and animals you may have seen on your hike. If you make a trip there, help your child choose some books to read. Whether they can read on their own or with your assistance, encourage budding bookworms to choose reading material that is both challenging and interesting to them. Help them learn to enjoy reading without always associating books with academia. No matter the topic, reading will help keep kids minds active.

In fact, research has shown that the amount of independent reading a child does outside of school relates to their growth in vocabulary, verbal fluency, reading comprehension and general knowledge. Kids who read on their own improve their reading skills, have greater content knowledge and score higher on achievement tests than children who do not crack a book open outside of school. If your kids are less than enthusiastic, consider putting together an incentive program to help keep them motivated to read and sneakily cultivate a joy for reading. Create a chart and put a sticker on the chart each time they finish a book. If they are younger, they could be given a treat or a special privilege each time they reach a certain number of books read. If they are older, choosing a place to visit over the weekend or an extra hour to play with friends may help.

Go on field trips. There are so many great places to visit in the summer that are fun, but still incorporate education and learning. Local museums are always a great place to go and are very popular with kids. Go online to see if a museum near you is offering any discounts or summer programs and events for children and families. Zoos and farms are also exciting places to explore. Many offer special shows and activities for families to do together such as picking berries, hay rides and feeding the animals.

Get creative. Doing arts and crafts is a perfect way to get the other side of a child's brain working. Bring the outdoors inside by doing art with pinecones to make a birdfeeder, gathering sticks to make a house, or just letting kids 'wing it' and decide what they want to do on their own. Whether it's painting, coloring, stamping or building masterpieces with play-dough, all are great options to keep your child's creative juices flowing and brain power growing.

Immerse the family in other cultures. If you're going on a family trip this summer, take the time to

research the destination beforehand. Talk to your kids about the different things they will experience there – climate, food, dress, local customs, etc. It is a great way to get them excited for the trip too.

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Staying local? Why not have different themed nights where you can cook a meal together and teach your kids about the culture the food comes from? They can learn about the joy of cooking, maintain their measurement skills and explore a new culture all at the same time.

When left to their own devices, kids are the most creative and imaginative people around us. So be sure not to schedule all their time this summer and give them a chance to play together and just be kids!