

Planning Your School-Age Child's Summer

Summer vacation can raise a new -- and sometimes difficult -- set of childcare issues. But with planning and the right set of options, you can arrange a summer that works well for you and your child.

The right arrangement for your child

It's important to consider your child's age, special interests, and personality when making summer plans. And no matter when you start your planning or what choices you consider, it's important to include your child in the decision-making process.

Not every child wants or needs a heavily scheduled summer. You may find that a combination of structured activities (like those provided at many day camps) and less structured activities (like staying with a neighbour or a visit to relatives) works well for your child.

Working with your family's schedule

Because many programs and activities require advance registration, it's a good idea to start planning and organizing your family's summer schedule as early as the winter months. Mark down any dates you already know and add to them as your plans develop. When does school end? Will you be taking any time off to be at home? Are any relatives or friends planning to visit?

You may want to consider pacing your child's activities so that a big activity like a trip is followed by a quieter time with a sitter at home or with a neighbour or relative. This can be especially important for younger children.

Making a summer calendar

If your child's summer will include several different kinds of care arrangements, you may find it helpful to make a large summer calendar to show what will happen when. You can use pages from a store-bought calendar, or make your own on poster board.

In addition to blocking out weeks to show when your child will be at day camp, for example, and when he will share care at a neighbour's, you can mark down special celebrations and outings to which your child can look forward. These could include birthdays, community holidays, or visits from friends.

Next to the calendar, try posting a list of activities that your child (and maybe your entire family) would like to participate in this summer -- picnics, for example, or visiting a zoo or museum you've never been to before. Your child could also make a list of books he'd like to read over the summer, games he'd like to play, and friends he'd like to play with.

Thinking about the options

Possibilities for your child's summer care include:

- *Local park and community centre recreation programs.* These are often half-day or all-day programs, sometimes in special areas like sports, art, or music. Programs like these tend to have limited hours (often 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., but some offer extended-day coverage for an extra fee.
- *Day camps.* Many Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, schools, attractions, and religious organizations offer day camps. Like recreation programs, some offer extended-day coverage.
- *Activity programs and workshops.* Some organizations like museums and nature societies offer short-term workshops in a variety of areas. Organizations may include:
 - language-school programs
 - theatre-sponsored workshops
 - music-school programs
 - museum programs
 - public library summer reading programs
 - college- or community college-sponsored programs
- *Expanded after-school programs.* Before- and after-school programs that operate during the school year at YMCAs, schools, or other community agencies sometimes expand to offer full-day care during the summer, even for children who aren't enrolled during the school year.
- *Overnight camps.* Depending on your child's age, previous experience with being away from home, and personality, overnight camp can be a good option for part of the summer. Many offer emphasis in certain areas, like sports, computers, nature, or language study. Some offer one-week stays; others extend for nearly the entire summer. Some provide bus transportation.
- *Visiting friends and relatives.* Your child may enjoy spending some time with a relative or a friend's family. (You may be able to trade off taking care of their children in return.) This experience can be just as enriching as a structured one, and may feel like a good change of pace after the school year.
- *In-home care.* You may want to consider finding a high school or college student, friend, or neighbour to spend a few days, a week, or a few weeks at your home. Or you may want to think about sharing a provider with the parents of one of your child's friends.
- *Volunteer programs.* Volunteering -- at a recycling centre, place of worship, library, zoo, park, or museum can be a good possibility for an older child. You may also want to ask local summer camps whether they offer CIT (counsellor-in-training) programs for older children.

Planning ahead

Structured programs that are in demand often fill up early. In many communities, it's important to start collecting information as early as December or January. It's a good idea to:

- *Gather information early.* Look online; for newspaper announcements; call your EAP; ask if your child's school provides information about local programs; talk with other parents. Call programs directly or visit their websites to find out about timelines, cost/financial aid information, and whether there is an open house.
- *Attend open houses.* If the program doesn't offer an open house, make an appointment to speak with the director and visit the space the program will be in.
- *Talk with other parents whose children have attended programs you are considering.*

Questions to ask

You will want to learn as much as you can about a program before you decide to enrol your child. At an open house or at a meeting with the director you may want to ask:

- *What is a typical day?* Is there a balance of active and quiet play?
- *What is the director's background?* Who are the staff members? What is their background and experience? What kind of training does the staff receive?
- *How many children attend the program?* How many counsellors and other staff members will there be?
- *How old are the counsellors?* The Canadian Camping Association recommends that staff must be at least 16 years old and be at least two years older than the campers with whom they work.

Try to get a look at the place where the program will be.

- Does the playground and other recreational equipment seem appropriate for your child's age? Is the equipment clean and safe?
- Is there adequate space?
- Do you think your child would feel comfortable here?

What about accreditation?

If you're considering an overnight camp, verify that the camp in question be accredited by your Provincial Camping Association. Accreditation visitors ask questions -- often more than 300 of them -- regarding essential health, safety, and program quality, as well as issues important to a camp's overall operation. This does not guarantee a risk-free environment, but it can be solid evidence of a camp's commitment to a safe and nurturing environment for children.

Help with costs

Outside help with paying for summer care includes the following:

- *Government childcare subsidies may be available for those who meet income guidelines.* They may be applied only to government-regulated childcare programs. Some communities may offer a limited number of subsidies, so it can be important to apply early.
- *Some programs may have sliding fee scales related to family income.*

- *Some organizations offer grants to low-income families which become available as a result of donated funds.*

At-home activities

If your child will spend some time at home this summer, it's a good idea to plan some special activities in advance. You can work with your child to make a list of things she'd like to make, for example, and buy simple supplies at a craft store.

Some activities that school-age children often don't have time for during the school year, but that can be interesting ways to spend summer time at home include:

- making models from kits
- sewing, including embroidery or making simple clothes
- origami
- playing board games, like chess, checkers, Chinese checkers, and Parcheesi
- gardening (in pots on the windowsill if you don't have outside space)
- jigsaw puzzles
- cooking
- making paper airplanes

Keep in mind that online research and visiting your local library can provide you and your child with endless ideas for summer play. Try looking under "crafts," "nature," "cooking," and "activities."

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