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How to Survive Summer Vacation

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Kids with AD/HD need structure, which isn't automatic in the summertime. But with the right mix of scheduling and spontaneity, June to September can be a happy break for the whole family.

Hooray for summer! School's out, the weather is warm, and your kids are ready to play. Summer camp may be in the picture, but what's most enticing is the freedom and luxury to do absolutely *nothing* — until you've done it for a while.

"Mom, I'm bored!"

"Dad, there's nothing to do!"

It's amazing how quickly the thrill of nothing to do can wear off, sometimes in a matter of days. That's when you realize how tricky the transition from academic routine and structure to the lazy days of summer can be. When your child has AD/HD, you can make two safe predictions about summertime: Your child is likely to get bored easily and often; and he's almost as likely to become demanding — of your time, attention, and patience. The way to manage summer's lack of structure is to strike the right balance between free time and planned time. I hope these guidelines will light your way.

Keep a calendar (but leave some blank spaces). Even during the languorous summer months, children need structure to feel secure and have a sense of what to expect. A simple calendar of events lets your child see what's coming. Fill in ahead of time a mix of major summer activities, such as the family vacation or trips to visit relatives, and casual recreational activities, such as a weekend trip to the zoo or museum. For your younger child, you may also want to prearrange and mark down play dates.

Of course, summer should still be a time to relax, so try not to overschedule. One planned event a weekend is great, three or four can feel rushed and hectic. Leave room for down time every day, when your child can do whatever he wants — even nothing at all. And make time at the end of the day for the family to relax, read, and talk.

Loosen the reigns, but stay on course. The summer months cry out for flexibility. That being said, you don't want to relinquish basic family rules and routines. It's tempting to let kids stay up later in summer, and a bit of that is OK. But remember that even a little sleep deprivation can lead to irritability and meltdowns at any time of year. So try to maintain basic bedtime habits. Stick to scheduled chores, too, as well as other established behaviors. For example, a whole day in front of the TV should remain taboo even during summer months.

Use community resources. Take advantage of the summer recreational and educational opportunities that most towns offer. Find a youth sports league, or sign up for day camp. Many local rec centers offer swimming, gymnastics, even computer classes. Encourage your artistic child to join a children's theater group or sign up for community art or jewelry-making courses. In addition, visit local zoos and museums, and find out where and when summer festivals are scheduled in your area. Don't forget to add selected activities to your calendar. When you plan ahead of time and write it down, you're more likely to do it.

Play after work. During the school year, you set a regular study time for your child because it helps him get the work done. In the same way, scheduled playtimes in summer — for kids and parents together — will insure fun as well family bonding. This applies whether you work in an office or stay at home with your kids. So play catch in the back yard, take a bike ride, or go for ice cream. These relaxed times provide just the change of

pace you and your child need to destress after nine months of school, or even a day's work.

Help your teen find work. A part time job is a rewarding way for an adolescent to spend some of his summer hours. Few things work better in building a sense of maturity, independence, and personal competence. The structure a job affords is a summer plus for kids with AD/HD, and the extra spending money is, of course, an added bonus. While some teenagers are capable of finding a job for themselves, many need guidance and encouragement.

Start by defining work goals for your child, such as earning money or learning a new skill. Discuss the right types of jobs, based on her skills, organizational ability, and attention capability. Then help her choose where to apply. It doesn't hurt to work on interview skills; role-play business owners and managers with her. Your encouragement and support may be just what your teen needs to follow through on a job search. [For more on this, see "You're Hired, Now What?" on page 50.]

Let kids be kids. This may be the key to your child's summer-vacation success. Essentially, being a child is natural, spontaneous, and easy. You encourage this process when you allow your child the time and freedom to do what he feels like doing. As I said earlier, some structure during summer vacation is important. But so is unstructured down time. Most children can be amazingly creative in finding ways to have fun. With your encouragement, the freedom to do nothing opens up countless possibilities to do anything and everything.

Parents needn't be constant entertainment directors in the summer. Rather, it may be more helpful to express confidence in your child's ability to be creative and inventive — and then let him. So go ahead and schedule some activities, then get out of the way and let your child do what comes naturally.

Summer Fun — With Perks

The most joyous warm-weather activities can be opportunities for learning and skill building. Consider:

- **Good games.** Board games and family fun are synonymous, and there's more time for them in the summer. Beyond sheer recreation, simple, low-tech games can help kids focus, deal with frustration, and learn rules. Some even promote attention and memory (try *The Memory Game*), organization and problem solving (think *Clue*), and strategic thinking (done simply in *Chinese Checkers*).

- **Nice reads.** Make summer reading a happy pastime — even for the child who struggles — with turn-taking read-alouds, clever comic books, and word games like *Scrabble* (there's *Scrabble Junior* for younger kids) and *Smart Mouth*.
- **Cool collections.** All kids love to collect things, and summer's a great time to start or further a natural collection. Think shells from the beach, pinecones from the woods, stones from the country lane. The benefits of being out in nature for kids with AD/HD are well known, and collecting promotes organizational and mathematical thinking.
- **Favorite sports.** Ask your child which activities she likes best from gym class, and encourage her to keep them up while school's out. Even better, do them together. She'll burn off excess energy as she continues to hone motor skills.

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About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.