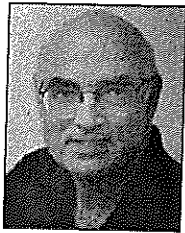


How Much Summertime Structure Do Kids Need?



By Dennis O'Brien

Sometimes getting children enrolled in the right camps is the easiest part of scheduling the structure they need for a well-rounded summer vacation.

Without parental planning, summer may lapse into mindless idleness punctuated by spurts of chaotic activities — none of which takes advantage of the three month opportunity summer vacation offers for personal growth, academic achievement or family bonding.

Q Some parents keep their children scheduled nearly all the time. Is this what I should do? How active should a normal child be?

A Healthy structure doesn't mean that children should be busy all the time. Downtime must be a part of any healthy mix.

Too often parents confuse good parenting with doing their utmost to develop all their children's talent, maximize every opportunity and schedule kids to the limit. Constant activity is stressful — especially when the focus is on improving.

Children should maintain a regular daily rhythm of when they rise and when they go to bed, when they do chores and when they can expect to participate in family meals and activities. They also need to be involved in responsible activities.

Q My child resists the activities I suggest. How can I get her engaged?

A One good way to provide structure is to involve children in the family planning process. Brainstorm together. List all of the activities each member would like to

do over the summer, which could include biking on the Katy Trail, going to a Cardinals Baseball game, visiting grandparents, reading twenty books, or vacationing at the lake.

Then take a calendar and note when some of these need to be scheduled and when the rest can be worked into the family calendar. Post the family "wish list," and check off each item when it has been accomplished. Review and celebrate your accomplishments together at the end of the summer season.

Q My husband thinks the children should have the summer off from school and academics, like we had. Is this what kids need?

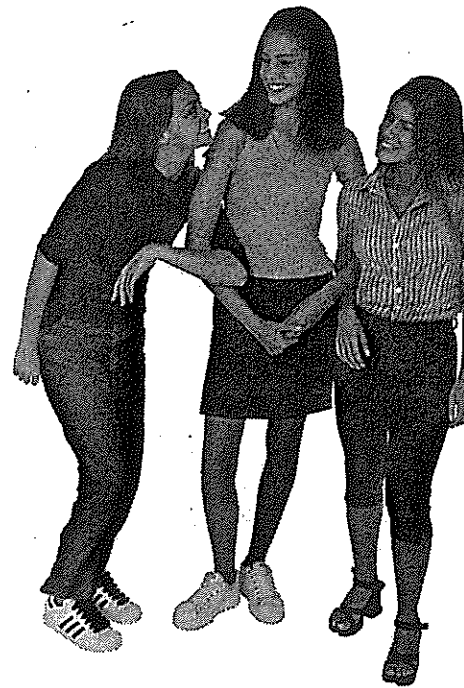
A Three months is too long for a child to go without intellectual stimulation and skill building. Make academics part of the mix.

Expect your child to read for an hour each day. Keep a record and set achievable goals for the reading your child engages in. Many libraries hold special summer reading programs for children, with intermittent rewards along the way.

If a child has an academic weakness, design a plan of attack, including structured assignments, regular homework times and supervision. If it is a serious deficit, consider tutoring.

Q If their activities aren't harmful, is there any reason my kids can't pace themselves over the summer?

A Yes. Parents must define limits and set responsibilities. Children get to choose within these healthy, safe parameters. Establish reasonable daily limits on the amount of time children spend watching television, playing electronic games or amusing themselves on the computer. The time children spend doing chores can be increased over



the summer. Some major jobs can be assigned over an extended period of time for older children and teens.

Adolescents and teens need both age-appropriate curfews and limits on the amount of time they can spend socializing with their friends. Be specific about which nights a child can use to see friends, which days, and what the parameters are. Socializing is healthy, but it should only be a modest portion of a child's summer. Hopefully, some of a child's social needs will be met through structured activities.

Q How can I keep my daughter busy and productive while I am at work? She is too young to hold a job and we can't keep her in camp all summer.

A Middle school students and adolescents can expand their own horizons and benefit others by engaging in community service. They also learn the importance of being punctual and responsible, and to take direction and cooperate with others while performing some very unglamorous tasks. Volunteer opportunities are readily available through churches, hospitals, and many non-profit agencies, but you will probably have to provide transportation to and from the site.

Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker and executive director of KidzLink, an organization serving medically fragile children. For more information, call (314) 721-4440.

