

# Summer Learning Loss

*June 2014*

It is hard to believe the 2013–14 school year has come to an end and teachers are already planning for the next school term. You are probably like me and remember what it was like as a child. We thought the school year would never end, but as we teachers get older, it seems the days and years literally fly by. We no sooner finish welcoming our students to the start of a new school year before we are sending them home for the summer break.

Probably the last thing most of our children want to think about right now is school, but research shows that students can forget or lose skills, knowledge, or grade-level equivalency while they are out of school if allowed to drift through the summer months without educational experiences. Over time, summer learning loss can really add up. By the end of 6th grade, those who have lost reading skills every summer can be an average of two years behind their peers. The impact of learning loss is greatest in children with special needs such as students with disabilities or English language learners. Because English language learners do not always have English speaking parents, they may go the entire summer without practicing their English. There is often greater learning loss in students from economically poor families. They may not always have the opportunities to travel and enjoy the cultural experiences that their more affluent peers have.

Children learn best when instruction is continuous, but for the most part we are still following the school calendar used since the first formal schools were established in America. That calendar was designed to fit the needs of a mostly agricultural society. Some communities had long summer breaks because the children were needed at home to help plant and harvest crops. The nine-month school calendar emerged when the majority of Americans were involved in farming. Today less than 3% of families make their living through farming. For this reason, many communities have gone to a year-round calendar. The thoughts of year-round school often sends fear into the heart of a student, but year-round does not mean students attend school every day, all year long. They still attend school the same number of days per year as they currently attend but the days are spread out over the entire year, with smaller breaks every few weeks.

It is important to keep children actively learning during the summer months to avoid what is often called summer brain drain. Even children from the same family may be very different when it comes to their choice of summer activities and amount of summer learning loss. As a mother and a teacher, it was my experience that children do not often choose to read and write over the summer break. If left to their own choices, they may spend hours in front of the TV or playing games on their computer or hand held devices. If they do not choose to read on their own, parents must find ways to encourage them. Keeping children actively reading, writing, and learning during the summer break will help them remember and extend what they have already learned in school. Summer is an excellent time to make real connections with what they are learning. Spend time each day talking to your children and ask them questions about the world around them. Look for opportunities to have students read to you in real life situations such as helping you read the assembly instructions for home projects or recipes while you prepare meals. Have them keep a journal or diary of their summer.

Encourage your child to read magazines and other printed material that interests them by taking your children to the public library to choose their books. Thanks to a grant, the Northwest Georgia Regional Library is working in cooperation with Tunnel Hill Elementary and Cohutta Elementary to keep their media centers open this summer so children can check out books and participate in learning activities. Set aside some time each day for reading, even if it is just 15–30 minutes. This is a good time to read a book with them so you can discuss the book together. Ask them questions about the main characters, plot, and setting and have them list the events in the book in chronological order. Keep paper and crayons or markers readily available so they can write and illustrate their own true stories or tall tales they make up themselves.

While you are having them work on reading, don't forget to have them practice their math skills. Working on just three or four math problems per day during the summer will help maintain and strengthen their math ability. Purchase a math workbook on the child's academic level and let him complete a few pages each day or make your own math problems for him to solve. Online resources can provide games and learning activities. Make a daily schedule that includes time for reading and math practice. With just a little practice every day, the summer learning loss can be lessened or even eliminated. Most of all, make it fun for you and the child!