



Summertime, and the living is easy

Angela Baura discovers the importance of stress-free summer learning

Standing before a packed auditorium of students at Hong Kong International School (HKIS), US paediatrician and best-selling author, Dr Cara Natterson, explained why kids are prone to irrational behaviour: there is a disconnect between their bodies and brains. Children's bodies are entering puberty earlier than ever before but their brains are developing much more slowly than we ever realised. Put simply, they look like grown-ups but think like kids.

The students listened, some sprawled over their seats, others whispering to their friends, and others distracted by their young thoughts. Suddenly, they all bolted upright and gasped in surprise: "The US National Sleep Foundation recently announced that tweens need 9-11 hours and teenagers need 8-10 hours of sleep at night to promote healthy body and

brain development," said Dr Cara.

"When you sleep your body grows, your mood is re-set and your brain rests," she explained to her attentive audience. "You're then better able to store, retrieve and utilise information, think clearly, perform at school, and be physically and emotionally well." Judging by the students' reactions, it was obvious that few, if any of them, were meeting the new guidelines.

Pushed too hard

It's no wonder that today's children are losing out on precious sleep. Much as they would like to slow down and unwind, children feel compelled to meet parental expectations, says Annette Faldyn, Counsellor at HKIS – a school that actively supports the wellbeing of its students.

"When I ask children in guidance classes about stressors from school, they reply with everything from homework to tutoring sessions, after-school activities and early morning classes before school. Here in Asia,

the push to be ahead of the game in maths, languages and even sports is also a high-stress factor for students. It's as though their bodies and minds are telling them to relax and play and have a life, but their consciences are telling them to please their families," she comments.

If we want to see our children thrive at school and in life, we need to manage their stress levels and motivate them to sleep, advises Cristina Rodenbeck, Holistic Wellness Coach at Manipura Wellness Practice. "This is imperative for children to recover and re-energise. I often see students who struggle with anxiety, insomnia, a lack of focus and a sense of being overwhelmed, in part due to their fear of disappointing their families."

Stress-free summer

With many students experiencing too much stress and too little sleep over the school year, the long summer break is a chance for them to relax and recharge, advises Gail Maidment, Executive Director of Generations Christian Education, a not-for-profit organization which runs Small World Christian Kindergarten, Norwegian International School and Island Christian Academy.



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“Summer needs to be a time for a different pace of life for children. It should be a time for them to rest, recoup and have ample opportunity to play,” Gail advises.

Some parents may worry that by ‘whiling away’ the summer holiday their child will fall behind at school and in life. As Dr Cara points out, there is evidence to suggest that children who do nothing over the summer lose academic progress. In educational jargon, this is known as the ‘summer slide’.

Play is the most efficient driver of learning, Gail asserts. Quoting the *New York Times* bestseller *Teach Your Children Well – Why Values and Coping Skills Matter More Than Grades, Trophies, or ‘Fat Envelopes’*, by US psychologist Dr Madeline Levine, she notes, “In unstructured play, kids learn to negotiate, cooperate and figure out how to settle differences, to make rules and most importantly to play by the rules. Unstructured play... lays the

groundwork for social competence and stimulates imagination – the underpinning for creativity, and, ultimately, innovation. Taken together, these are the exact skills most likely to be sought after in the twenty-first century global economy.”

Agreeing with the overarching importance of play, Dr Cara advises that students can also maintain academic progress through self-motivated, creative learning over the summer.

Annette explains: “As content becomes complicated, more practice or rehearsal is necessary to hold information upon which new or additional information is added. There are ways this can be done without signing children up for hours upon hours of institute-type memorization: for example, reading that is stimulating and engaging, problem solving that excites neural pathways and viewing of media that are instructive, fun and highly interesting.”

Age-appropriate learning

According to Gail, children up to the age of five years will benefit from adequate sleep, play, and quality time with loved ones over the summer break.

Between the ages of 6 to 10 years, children have a broader range of skills that they can develop: “Drama, sports, creative arts, music, for example, provide opportunities where children build their sense of self as well as having the opportunity for enrichment. At this age and beyond, children can also get involved in service opportunities – beach clean-ups, or other charity initiatives that allow for character building. The important thing is to have your child involved in the choice of activities over the summer break and to not sign them up for courses day in, day out,” says Gail.

For teenagers, she recommends fun activities that teach life lessons. “Summer camps either in Hong Kong or overseas are something a child



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can look forward to going back to, year after year. Service opportunities through a social club, Scouts or a youth group are great experiences for children to build meaningful contributions and connections to others, while summer jobs for a week can help the older teen understand more about preparing for the future.”

The summer break also allows for “family time to talk, reflect and make special memories,” she adds.

Cristina agrees. “Visit relatives wherever they are over the summer,” she says. “Families can provide extra and important emotional support. Growing with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins can be a rewarding experience and create bonds for a lifetime.”

Outdoor physical play

Recounting tales of her own idyllic summers in Australia spent playing outdoors with siblings and friends

from the neighbourhood, going to the beach, climbing trees and camping in the backyard, Gail recommends children enjoy the great outdoors during the summer months.

Outdoor physical play is important for children, not only to build strong muscles and naturally massage the lymphatic system, but also to cleanse the body and allow natural stress-busting endorphins to be pumped in, says Cristina.

But in Hong Kong, children’s lives are often void of nature and outdoor activities, notes Annette, who says that children spend too much time indoors on their media devices.

Tracey Nicole Batty, mother of six-year-old Isabella, comments, “The Hong Kong lifestyle is so busy and because the majority of us don’t have backyards, our children go to far more after-school activities than children in other countries. Given this trend, I always plan a couple of weeks’ holiday

overseas in the summer, mainly to visit family, but apart from that I plan very little. I like to slow things down so Isabella is going with the flow. We are fortunate to live in an apartment with great pools and a playground so most of the time we make decisions on the day.”

Tracey believes that through free play with friends who all come from different cultures and family values, “Isabella can ask questions, consolidate her learning and spend time creating/recreating her value system.”

Mindful of media

Over the summer break, it may be all too easy for children to pass their days staring at a screen. In moderation, media can be a highly useful learning tool but used inappropriately, it can contribute to higher stress levels in children.

“Technology hyper-stimulates the brain, creating greater anxiety and stress. It also creates social issues as





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children's attention and focus are diverted from social human connections to cyber worlds," Cristina warns.

Annette agrees, "The social need to keep up with chatting and other social media is indeed stressful for children, either in content or anxiety-related ways, i.e. whether one is friended, un-friended, or who has access to what devices and what programmes."

As Dr Cara points out, allowing children access to media without setting parameters pushes children to behave older than they actually are. "Let kids be kids. Parents need to set age-appropriate boundaries to ensure children are not thrust into situations beyond their emotional and mental capabilities."

Staying sane

For some parents, finding ways to keep kids stimulated over the summer can add to their own stress levels. The last thing a parent wants is bored and upset children at home, becoming restless.

To ensure a relaxing summer for the whole family, Cristina suggests that parents consider a plan of action following the 6Ws: What will you and your children like to do over the summer? Why are you making these choices? Where can these activities take place? Who will be organising the details and booking activities? When will you start and stop activities? Which activities do you need to have in place for a great holiday?

Susanna Yeong, working mother of Rafael, 4, and Javier, 2, attests, "Rafael attends a special summer programme at school. This works well for me as a working mum who can't spend more time with my children over the holiday. After summer school, my sons love playing with their friends in the playground until dinner time. On the weekends, we do a lot more outdoor activities as a family to give my boys opportunities for physical development, which Rafael wouldn't normally get at school. I also enrolled

Rafael in soccer and rock climbing courses to help him build up his confidence, and I schedule visits to family when possible. I love summer!"

Precious time

While it may not be possible to ensure that children are adequately rested all year round, parents can encourage children to enjoy a carefree childhood over the summer break.

As Gail sums up, "As educators, it is very sad to see children returning to school tired from going to classes all summer. Childhood is a very precious time, where children need to enjoy growing and experiencing the positive aspects of life, to build for their future. The summer holiday is a great time to unwind while at the same time, learning in a different way. Create opportunities for special family times and enrichment, and hopefully by the end of the summer the child will be filled up with new experiences that build into their lives for the coming years." 