

## It's Summer - Time to do Nothing!

Can you believe it?? June is almost here and another school year is winding down. I hope it's been a good one for you and your children, but even after a wonderful year – and certainly after a challenging year – it's nice to have a little break from the school routine. Just having a little more free time can be liberating for parents and kids. Of course, for parents working outside the home, so it doesn't get much easier to squeeze out the free time. Still, there's just something about summer- the longer days, the nicer weather - that makes some unhurried, unscheduled time seem a little more possible. So how can you make the most of whatever “extra” time summer brings to your family life? And what can you do to make sure your children continue to grow this summer with all the assets (the relationships, experiences, skills and values) they need in their lives?

Maybe the first thing to do would be to resist the strong temptation to fill-up whatever little unhurried, unscheduled time you do have with activities, projects and schedules. Most of us are so used to having schedules and activities; we think it's just how life should be. We may even feel a little guilty about not being constantly scheduled. We may have a hard time giving ourselves and/or our children permission to just “do nothing”. Somehow, it just doesn't seem right. But it is right and it is essential to healthy development. A lot of growing and developing can happen when you're “doing nothing”. In their book, The Irreducible Needs of Children, pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton and child psychiatrist, Stanley Greenspan talk about the value of unstructured “hanging out” time as a *developmentally appropriate experience* all children need, through childhood, adolescence and beyond.

When we give children time to do nothing, we empower them to dream and imagine and think their own thoughts. With “nothing to do”, children have time to notice what's going on in their backyard or on their sidewalk. They have time to actually see what the ants are doing, or catch a firefly or hear a bird singing. They can watch the construction in the neighborhood and have time to actually see what's going on. They can kick a ball around and pretend they just scored the winning goal. Those kinds of experiences are as valuable to children's development as more structured activities. You can support your children in their “doing nothing” by taking their lead - coming to look at the ants when they ask you to or just hanging out and doing nothing with them.

Another important thing that may happen when there's “nothing to do” is an actual conversation – about the ants or the thunderstorm coming or dreams and ideas - whatever it is you'd both like to talk about. It's when you're doing nothing, that you really can give your child the gift of your full attention and your child can give that gift right back to you.

Now we all know “doing nothing” is only going to last for so long (maybe only minutes) and then you will hear the familiar summer refrain “ M -o-m! There's nothing to do - I'm bored!” In my own experience, especially with young children, I thought it was so interesting to hear what “bored” means to children. Very often they have no idea what

bored means. They may be tired of doing a particular thing, or would like some company, or just a *little* help figuring out what to do next. In response to their cries of boredom, maybe you could give a few suggestions, and see what happens. But, it's really not up to parents to fill their children's bored moments. The circus doesn't come to town every day! If we want our children to be resourceful and feel empowered, we have to let them practice thinking for themselves. A little boredom can be a great motivator!

As you all know, children absolutely need all kinds of experiences; structured/unstructured, quite/active, with friends and all by themselves for their healthy development. As parents and as community, we need to be sure there are lots and lots of different kinds of experiences for all our children. Exposure to all kinds of activities and experiences helps children discover what they're good at and what they like, and also what they hate and aren't so good at. Structured activities also give our children a chance to be with another caring, responsible adult – a most essential asset for children.

Like most of life, it's all about balance. Children do need their parents to help them figure out how to balance their lives. You are the ones who know your children best, so you are the ones who can help them find the balance between active and quiet and structured and unstructured that will work best for each of them. Just make sure to include a little bit of doing nothing!

Have a wonderful summer and if you can, step out of our crazy culture and take time to do nothing yourselves!

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***Imagine a community where all children's needs are met and their voices heard.***