



Stave Off Learning Loss: Summer Reading

By Mary Quattlebaum

Towers of novels and truck tales loom enticingly in the Suardi home in Northwest Washington. For mom Amy, author of the popular Frugal Mama blog, summer brings unstructured time and a chance for her four children to dive into books and explore interests put on hold during the busy school year. Sons Mark, 5, and Luke, 2, revel in Alice Schertle's Little Blue Truck stories and daughters Sofia, 11, and Virginia, 9, are racing through Rick Riordan's series, which are inspired by Ancient Greek and Egyptian myths.

Not only is summer reading pleasurable, says Kathie Meizner, manager for Montgomery County Public Libraries, but it's crucial to staving off "summer slide" or a loss of knowledge during non-school months. Reading "at least six to eight books" during the summer can make a big difference, she says.

Bettina Forman, a reading specialist at Terraset Elementary School in Fairfax County, Va., agrees. "Summer reading loss is a well-documented phenomenon," she says, pointing to the recently published *Summer Reading: Closing the Rich/Poor Reading Achievement Gap* by Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen. And she supports Kelly Gallagher's contention in *Readicide* that "all kids should be required to read in the summer."

As parents, Forman, Meizner and Suardi know that summer can be as busy (with camps, sports and vacations) and full of distractions (screens, social media) as the school year. Joined by fellow parents and reading advocates, Susan Modak, librarian at the Noyes Library for Young Children in Kensington, and Rachael Walker, a consultant to WETA's Reading Rockets program, offer summer-reading tips to engage children—and enrich the whole family.

1. Visit Your Local Library

Summer is a "chance for the public library to play a bigger role in children's lives," says Meizner. Youngsters can check out print books and digital materials and sign up for the Summer Reading Program at libraries throughout the country. (This year's theme is "Dig into Reading.") As part of this program, kids can track their books read, earn prizes and a certificate and enjoy specially scheduled music, puppet, science and magic performances. "We want to invite, inspire and encourage families to see the richness of the library," says Meizner.

2. Set Aside Time for Reading

According to blogger entrepreneur Suardi, "story time before bedtime and nap time is sacred," with each child choosing one book for a daily, shared time with a parent. As Forman's two now college-aged daughters grew, family members discovered a mutual enjoyment of reading their own books in a shared space in the evening. It's a "great opportunity for bonding," says Forman, as it encourages questions and the sharing of passages and ideas.

Noyes librarian Modak suggests reading aloud to your school-aged child, especially if she is struggling with reading or is fascinated by a complex topic. This can draw the child in and enrich vocabulary and comprehension.

3. Explore Online Resources

Does your child have a favorite book, series or author? Many publishers maintain websites with supplementary materials (games,



activities, teaching guides) that connect with specific books. Your child might even be able to email her favorite author.

An especially valuable resource is Start with a Book (startwithabook.org), created by WETA's Reading Rockets, a national multimedia literacy initiative. Twenty-four themes (music, dinosaurs, oceans, sports, bugs, flight, inventors) connect kids ages 5 to 9 with "great books, hands-on activities and multimedia resources," says Walker. For parents, the site includes reading tips in 11 languages, ideas for encouraging reading and writing and resources to help "support and strengthen their kids' reading skills, especially fluency," she says. Launched last year, Start with a Book reached thousands of families, says Walker, with 55 percent of survey respondents reporting an increase in the amount of time, because of the program, that their children had spent with books over the summer.

4. Let Your Child Choose

The freedom to choose at the library or bookstore can be a youngster's strongest motivation for summer reading. Also, Forman suggests a print-rich home, with books, magazines, poetry collections, graphic novels and comic books in every room. "When [the material] is out and about, it's more likely to attract attention," she says.

There is value in both nonfiction and fiction, says Meizner, suggesting that parents not privilege one over the other. "Reading is a way to connect with oneself and with a world of possibilities," she continues. "When children can see themselves as characters in a book, they feel less isolated and more connected, and when they meet people unlike themselves as characters in a book, their empathy is engaged."

5. Limit Screen Time, Including Your Own, and Model Reading

Of course, this can be easier said than done! Suardi manages by keeping the TV (without cable) in a "remote area" of the house, she says, and restricts her children's computer time to "writing stories on Google Drive and emails to friends and relatives." She speaks to the importance of modeling the behavior we want to see in our children. Although her work as a blogger requires that she be online, Suardi tries not to have the computer open when her children are around. She also goes completely unplugged during family vacations as a way of being "fully present" with her kids and to ensure she gets the time she needs to relax, read books and enjoy the natural world.

6. Discuss Books as a Family. Over the course of the summer, family members might each choose one book for everyone to read and talk about. This exchange can be lively and fun and also give fascinating insight into the way each person thinks and feels. My family did this when my now teenage daughter was younger, and we still refer fondly to a particular book-obsessed time as "The Summer of Harry Potter." As Reading Rockets consultant Walker puts it, "Family conversations will be richer and more plentiful when you can talk about a book you've all shared together."

7. Try Activities Related to Books. For Walker, her husband and their two boys, 14 and 11, reading has "set us on very interesting paths, from archery lessons to textile mills to sewage treatment plants." Summer is a perfect time to explore and follow up on your child's questions and interests. Walker's family has built a Magic School Bus (inspired by the playful science series of the same name), boiled maple syrup for snow candy and tried grinding acorns like the young character in *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George.

8. Visit and Read About Places. The Maryland-D.C.-Virginia area is rich in things to do and see. A trip to George Washington's home, Mount Vernon; a Nationals baseball game or an adventurous boat ride with the Chesapeake Pirates in Annapolis can spur curious kids to learn more. The Start with a Book website has a tab, "DC for Kids," that lists local museums and historic or intriguing sites and includes related activities and books. Or check out the popular guide edited by Meizner, *Going Places with Children in Washington, DC (17th edition)*.

9. Start or Participate in a Book Club or Swap. Plan a social activity by hosting a book swap, as Suardi suggests, or a discussion, with refreshments to help create a festive atmosphere. One summer, my daughter, then a rising third grader, and her friends all read a novel and hosted a book party at which the author talked about her novel, guided the kids in a craft and signed her books.

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