

Successful Summer Supports for Your Typical and Sensory Children
By Carolyn Dalgliesh

We all look forward to lazy summer days where the schedule is loose and school-time routines fade away. Some downtime is imperative for all of us, but for sensory kids like those with anxiety disorder, sensory integration dysfunction, learning challenges, ADD/ADHD, obsessive/compulsive disorder, high-functioning autism, Asperger's syndrome, or other sensory challenges- the lack of schedules and routines in the summer can be overwhelming. As the parent of a typical child and a child with a neuropsychiatric disorder, I have to support my children in two very different ways over the summer. As a professional home organizer, I know the value of routines, schedules and visual aids in supporting typical and sensory kids in the home, especially when the routine is ever-changing!

Here are a few things to try at home this summer to help all types of kids survive the downtime:

- Have a **central message area** for the family. This needs to be big and should have a large weekly (or daily, if more appropriate) calendar to write out what is coming for the week. Include camps, beach trips, when there will be downtime at home, reading time, as well as some of the daily expectations. Letting the sensory child know what is happening and when to expect it can lower his anxiety level and prepare him for the times he will need to be engaged.
- Try to build in a **loose routine** to your summer days. Have some things that are expected to be done every day and include them on the central message area.
- **Differentiate the week from the weekend** to help younger kids learn the difference between a summer week and summer weekend and what they look like. For example, Dad still works during the week and is home on the weekends. Come up with a list of things you can do on sunny weekdays and rainy weekdays during the summer and hang them in your central message area. Create a separate list of special things that will be done on the summer weekends. These supports will help all kids understand the concept of time over the summer and will help them feel more grounded and organized. For kids that do much better with routine, consider supporting them with a week on/week off camp routine or build in activities that are somewhat regular and structured throughout the summer. The structured activity can support a few different types of "sensory kids." For the child that has a high activity level and needs to be engaged, the structured activities will support these needs. Also, for the child that can be withdrawn and not engaged socially, these structured activities can engage him cognitively and support social connections (for an extra plus, allow him to pick one activity that supports one of his fascinations - chess or make your own computer game camp, etc.).

- **Learn in a fun way.** Summer is a great time to embrace those multisensory learning opportunities, such as making/tending a garden or creating a wooden float that will work in the pool. Another great multisensory learning tool is the diorama. This can be a fun research project to do over the summer. Let your child pick the topic (another good way to let sensory child tap into her fascination) or it can relate to a family trip you are taking over the summer. Let her decide how she wants to research it (library, computer or both) and what materials she wants to use to create her diorama. Join the library summer reading clubs - keeping the routine with a fun, structured reading program that has a reward at the end is bound to be a success for most children. If your child needs the more structured routine, consider getting him some regular tutoring to help him maintain and build his learning skills over the summer in a more organized way.

- Take the extra time you have with your child over the summer to **teach simple organizing skills.** A great place to start over the summer is in her bedroom. Try to work with your child to help her set up her room as a multifunctional area with different zones for each need. Create a sleeping area, a reading or quiet area, a play / toy area and a clothes storage / dressing area. For the sensory child, you would do this process much more slowly, being careful not to incorporate too many changes at once. With this type of bedroom organization, you will be teaching your child how to create that external organization that she might be lacking internally.

- **Organize your family trips.** Taking a family vacation can be the highlight to the summer for most of us. For the sensory child, taking some additional steps in preparing him for a trip can be the difference between a stressful trip and a successful trip. Make a visual trip book: go online and research where you are going - print out pictures and information and put it all in chronological order. Let your child look at it every day until you leave. Having this visual support will prepare him for the changes that will be coming and give him an idea of what he might be seeing and doing. Bring a blank daily schedule on your trip. Fill out the schedule each day of your trip to better prepare your sensory child for the routine.

- **Help them get back into the school routine before school starts.** Three weeks is the magic number for helping your kids successfully readjust to a new sleeping schedule or routine. Start by setting bedtime 15 minutes earlier each night and getting them up 15 minutes earlier until you reach the target school sleep/wake schedule. Create a booklet if your child seems particularly anxious about a new grade change and start reviewing a typical school day in the new grade. If a new morning schedule is something the child is expected to do independently at school, create that laminated checklist for them to review before school starts.

Set up your summer to be relaxing and fun by preparing your typical and sensory children for the downtime. By creating a central message area, building in loose routines, and preparing your children for the family trip, you will have the tools in place to have a wonderfully relaxing summer!

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