

Summertime Challenges for Parents

Parents of school-aged children can find summer vacations challenging and stress-producing. The types of challenges vary with the ages and numbers of children. The youngest need quality day care facilities or in-home care. The "tweens", ages 8 to 12 or between early childhood and teenage years, seem too old for day care and too young to be home alone. Teenagers might be old enough to take care of themselves, but might not have the maturity or wisdom to handle the rules and responsibilities during too much unstructured time.

A mix and match season

Piecing together a variety of summer programs and projects for their children is a common strategy for working parents. Day camps, overnight camps, enrichment courses, sports leagues, summer school, and extended home chores are popular ways to keep kids positively productive. Summer plans might also include in-home "sitters," and extended vacations to grandparents' or other relatives' homes. For teens, volunteer work and part-time jobs reinforce good values and strong work ethics.

However, managing the complex arrangements of combining various activities and programs, especially with multiple mixed-aged children, can be expensive, disorienting and downright exhausting. Schedules likely vary for each program or event, fees and materials costs add up, transportation arrangements conflict with work schedules, and last-minute cancellations can cause the best laid plans to collapse.

What are parents to do?

There is no getting around the need for organizing and managing time through the unpredictable summer months. Many

programs fill up early and care providers often have waiting lists from year to year. It helps when parents see themselves as masters of their time rather than victims of it. Getting an early start with arrangements is important, but so is having back-up plans when things don't work out (e.g., the sitter gets sick or summer camp is cancelled do to flooding.)

The most critical step in organizing summer schedules is to prioritize time with family values in mind. In other words, parents should evaluate summer activities and care options based on what is important in their lives and with thought to basic principles upon which they live their lives.

For example, one mother and father always arranged for their children to spend two weeks each summer with grandparents two hours away. As children grew older they preferred to stay at home in the summer to be near their friends and to take advantages of local programs. The parents appreciated the children's wishes and considered their own desire to have the children involved in quality local programs. They also felt strongly that it was important to their family values to have the children continue their responsibility to and respect for their grandparents. It was not an easy decision for them, but when the parents prioritized according to their values, they opted to send the children to the grandparents.

Value your decisions and yourself

After considering lists of summer options for *your* children, focus on why you would choose to involve them and yourself in a particular program or activity. Is it a sense of duty or out of guilt that you agree to

something on your list? Is it because you believe your children will learn and grow in an area where they need to develop? Or is it because you find it hard to say no?

Prioritizing according to values can help you keep the summer time activity dilemma in perspective. When prioritizing, try to keep the whole family in mind. Ask yourself whether a particular choice is worth the sacrifice to other family members in terms of finances, stress levels, and time. Ask whether the children will be safe, well-supervised, and enriched by the experience. Ask whether there are other viable options that are better suited to your family's values. And last but not least, ask yourself whether you are taking care of *yourself*.

Remember, if you spend all of your resources, including free time, on your children and none on yourself, you can find yourself burned out, broke, resentful, exhausted, and even sick. Make taking care of your mental and physical health one of your top priorities.

Prioritizing will not eliminate summertime parenting challenges, but it can help parents work with their families to make safe and practical choices for them, without allowing those choices to take over their lives.

Problems? Call the Student Assistance Program and arrange to talk to a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members.

Call (515) 244-6090 or (800) 327-4692.
TTY: (515) 288-9022 or (877) 542-6488.