

Summer lessons

Lately, I've been on a hiatus from work and have been spending more time at home with my 11-year old twins. Given the (somewhat) less hectic pace granted by lazy, hot summer temperatures, my family and I are spending more hours just hanging around together. Compared to the hectic school to after-school shuffle, there is more flexibility to wake up without an alarm clock, take a day at a time, and be spontaneous. It's also given me a chance to reflect on the many shared opportunities that summertime brings.

Participation is key

We all know that kids benefit from routines, so as parents it is not a bad idea to keep some regularity in our lives even during the summer months. In our house, these routines take the form of scheduling appointments and errands on weekdays and reserving more fun activities for the weekends. It's particularly helpful for children in the middle-childhood years (ages 6-12) to see all the behind-the-scenes effort their parents put in during a typical day. Participating in chores builds an appreciation for running the household, and it also gives extra meaning to the rewards earned afterwards.

For example, to discourage the impression that food just magically appears in the pantry or refrigerator, have your child help generate the grocery list, clip coupons, load the shopping cart and put away the items. If you have more than one child, have them rotate their responsibilities so each gets a chance to try different jobs. The earlier you have them contribute, the less they are likely to see it as "work". Moreover, the lessons they learn from such day-to-day activities will help them later in school. (We want our kids to relax, but not completely shut off their brains during the summer.) So, while there are certainly concrete math skills involved in discounts and savings, more subtle lessons can also arise. One that I've noticed is the conversations we have had as a result of our local supermarket's policy to hire several folks with mild disabilities. My children have a new appreciation for their capabilities instead!

Encourage problem-solving

Cooperation can be encouraged whenever a family makes decisions on how to spend their downtime as well. Sometimes a simple majority vote can work, but in a family of four, what happens when there is a tie? Instead of imposing the solution yourself, have your kids think about their own ideas. Perhaps it's as basic as flipping a coin or resorting to perennial favorite rock-paper-scissors. Your kids might surprise you by engaging in more complicated negotiations. It can be fascinating to watch older children work out their own solutions, especially when they move beyond the "it's not fair" stage. Let's say one child wants to stay at home and the other one wants to go to the beach. Let them hash it out themselves for a while, rather than jumping in and offering your own opinion. Sometimes they'll opt for immediate gratification; they're still kids, after all. But you will increasingly see them able to hold off on a small reward in order to earn a bigger one. Or you'll hear them compromising with one another; perhaps going to the beach tomorrow is perceived as a smarter choice, because the weather will be hotter or their friends will be able to join them. These are mundane examples in many ways, but that makes them ideal "practice runs" for the more important decisions your children will someday be making.

What if my child doesn't cooperate?

In general, a parent's best bet when the road gets bumpy is to hold back at first, rather than jump in to solve every spat. Research shows that this style of parenting (called "authoritative" because the parent is certainly in charge, but not acting as a dictator) leads to the best long-term results for children. As your child's social sphere moves beyond the immediate family, she will be better off if she's had practice defending her motives in the face of opposition. That is not to say she should be coddled into thinking her opinion is always right or more important than others'.

In fact, parents should seek out examples where their children need to think about their own motives or analyze the other person's perspective. This is particularly true for "only" children, who often have less experience in this realm. Assume your child is going to camp for the first time. Chances are there will be lots of group activities where things won't always go her way. Running "hypothetical" outcomes by your child is one way to help her prepare. Together, you can preview what the day's agenda is, point out to her counselors are there for guidance or advice, but also reinforce the idea that she is one of many children whose needs must be taken into consideration. If she complains she's not having fun, respond by discussing what another child might do in a similar situation. Or ask her how she would deal with the situation if she were the counselor. This is a more constructive method than asking "Why didn't you do this or that?" because it lessens the chance she'll be defensive and asks her to call on her own problem-solving skills.

Remember, school may be out for the summer, but our children's learning doesn't stop. Nor does our parental role as their teachers. The difference is somehow things feel more laid-back and less stressful during these months. Another bonus of summer!

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