

The Lazy(?) Days of Summer

by Janet Thompson, M.A., ECL Director

By the time May rolls around, many parent (and some preschooler) conversations I hear around CCFS focus on families' summer plans. They include talk of trips to visit grandparents, vacations to Disneyland, swimming lessons and classes at Explorit! Science Center. At times, though, parents express to me and to other staff members some anxiety about "what to do with" children during the exceptionally long break between UC Davis' Spring and Fall Terms. Although my own children have graduated to the summer job phase of life and beyond, I can vividly recall the frantic planning of activities to head off boredom (for myself as well as for them) and provide constructive experiences during their early summers.

Many parents, of course, depend on supervised summer activities and childcare in order to continue their own study and work. We often have CCFS student caregivers who are willing to provide regular or occasional care for families during the summer months. Sharing cooperative care with other families is also a popular choice. But, beyond meeting childcare needs, how can we address underlying concerns about making those un-programmed three-and-a-



half months worthwhile ones for our young children? The *good* news is that most of us live in Davis. The *bad* news is that most of us live in Davis. Living in Davis for any length of time means that we have undoubtedly been exposed to the pervasive attitude that we can never provide too many enrichment activities for our children. The message is that it is our job as parents to ensure that our children—from the earliest years—have all the experiences that will give them advantages in life—particularly in their later educational careers. Summer often seems like the perfect time to schedule in a few more.

Researchers who study practices that promote healthy early development send a different message. Many child development experts are concerned that structured activities increasingly displace too much unstructured time in children's lives. **Unstructured time is the prerequisite for the most valuable of young children's activities: spontaneous play.** It has been said that play is children's work. Children are motivated to work hard at their play because they can make it up themselves. They are fully engaged in their chosen activity, so they learn a great deal while having fun.

Many adults think a child's mind and body should be continually busy. They believe that only when kids are doing something planned are they learning. But a tendency to overschedule,

or to respond to every expression of boredom by immediately finding something for a child to do or providing "entertainment" ourselves or through electronic media can actually be counterproductive to the learning process. It doesn't allow a child to be inventive or reflective. We can short-circuit the beneficial effects of boredom if we always try to solve the problem for our children. Children, left to their own devices, soon tire of being bored and begin to look for their own solutions. Allowing them to work through the ennui strengthens their resourcefulness as well as enhancing self-esteem by increasing confidence in their own problem-solving ability.





Furthermore, **boredom can be the stimulus for daydreaming, which is very beneficial to young children.** Any-

thing is possible in a daydream. As early childhood educator Sherri Smith has written in her article, *The Fine Art of Daydreaming*, **“The relaxed state that occurs during a daydream allows the brain to filter out distractions of the moment and to go into a creative surge of imagination and reality.”** Though perhaps less obvious, children’s daydreams also provide the beginnings of self-reflection and self-discovery. Children need “down time” and time to be alone. These are the occasions when children’s imagination and creativity take hold.

As I mentioned earlier, the *good* news is that we live in Davis. It’s good news because **what we can and must do for our children is to provide an environment that is rich in the raw ingredients for nurturing creative play, curiosity, and reflection.** Our natural and community resources in Davis make that not only possible, but easy. Morning walks and bike rides along the greenbelts or on campus— before the midday heat descends—provide opportunities for play in beautiful open spaces and chances to see what’s growing and blooming, not to mention that ultimate childhood delight—the discovery of secret hiding places! If you go in the early morning or evening, your children will even have the chance to run through the sprinklers. My neighbors with young children often go out for “breakfast picnics” with other families .



Casual summer activities shared with you, combined with plentiful opportunities for unstruc-

tured play alone and with friends, are the “enrichment” experiences most valuable for young children. My own children’s childhood swim classes and music lessons have served them well, but exploring the “secret forest” in our neighborhood park and playing outside with squirt bottles full of water are what they still remember most fondly about summer.

Enjoy this summer with your children and notice what they take delight in. Simply playing is an enrichment experience.



They also take bike rides to the library or visit the Farmers’ Market to let their children choose fresh ingredients for summer cooking projects.