

Smart Ways to Spend the Summer

Learning Activities for Families

Brought to you by the brain-training experts at LearningRx

The “summer slide” may sound like fun, but it’s definitely something you’ll want to keep your kids far away from this summer! It’s a phenomenon teachers know all too well – the loss of knowledge and ability that typically occurs when formal education stops during the summer months.

- The average student loses approximately 2.6 months of grade-level equivalency in math computation skills over the summer months.
- Research shows ALL young people experience learning losses when they don’t engage in educational activities during the summer.
- Teachers typically spend 4 to 6 weeks re-teaching or reviewing material that students have forgotten over summer break.

In many ways, the brain is like a muscle and the old adage “use it or lose it” certainly holds true. Mental training can improve the brain, just as physical exercise can improve the body. So, here are some tips to keep your kids from “losing it” over summer break.

Simply getting your child to read every day is a great way to slow the summer slide. According to Scholastic Parents Online, research shows that reading just six books during the summer may keep a struggling reader from regressing. When choosing the six, make sure they’re the right level – not too hard and not too easy.

Many other simple, easy and fun activities can help you keep your kids off the summer slide, and possibly even make school easier for them when they return. These exercises keep the brain energized while building cognitive skills, the underlying mental abilities needed to learn. Some of these activities incorporate physical elements, some are perfect games to play in the car, and some are a great alternative to a video game when your child’s simply too hot, too tired, or too sunburned to play outside.

When playing games with kids, parents should focus on seven major learning skills: attention, working memory, processing speed, long-term memory, logic and reasoning, auditory processing, and visual processing.



Low-cost, store-bought brain games

Many store-bought games can help improve a wide variety of cognitive skills. You may already have some of these and not know how valuable they are when it comes to growing brain skills.

Simon – The original echo game, “Simon,” is great for auditory processing, memory and processing speed.

Mastermind for Kids – This new version of an old classic improves logic and reasoning.

Stratego, Chess and Checkers – For older kids, board games like Stratego, Chess and Checkers can grow mental tools like planning, memory, comprehension and focus.

Phonics Flashcards – For very young kids, phonics flashcards can be a great springboard to early reading skills, like sound analysis, sound blending and segmenting.

Bop-It Extreme – This is a fun tool for building many cognitive skills, including auditory processing, logic and reasoning, processing speed, planning, and selective attention.

Legos – They’re not exactly cheap, but chances are you already have some! Legos are excellent for deductive reasoning, planning, and problem solving.

Slapjack – This age-old card game helps with divided attention, processing speed, short-term memory and visual processing.

Tangoes – This competitive tangrams game has varying levels of difficulty. People can race against the clock or each other. Many versions are available in travel-compatible cases. Tangrams help with visualization, memory, attention, and logic and reasoning.

Where’s Waldo? – Or any of the knock-offs in book, poster, or 3-D form can generally be adapted to any age group. These exercises build divided attention, selective attention and visual processing skills.

Speed Cards – Take a regular deck of cards and time your child as they separate it into two piles (red and black) or four piles (spades, hearts, clubs, diamonds). Time them, and as they get faster, try to distract them, or give them math problems to solve as they’re working. This will improve processing speed, divided attention, selective attention and visual processing.

For information on many more games and the brain skills they build, visit www.unlocktheeinsteinside.com and download the free Games For Skills chart.

No-Cost, Home-Created Brain Games and Activities

Plenty of free games can also increase cognitive abilities and keep kids off the “summer slide”. The trick is to find several that are age-appropriate and that your kids find fun. Here are a few favorites from the brain-training experts at LearningRx.

Paperless Tic-Tac-Toe: Take the classic game of tic-tac-toe and assign each box a number. Have your child visualize this grid in her mind and call off the box number in which she wants to place her mark. Or, try playing tic-tac-toe by drawing the grid in the air and pointing to the box where you want to place your mark. The game is over when someone wins with three in a row, or when someone loses by taking an occupied spot.

What it helps: Memory, visualization, planning, focus, problem solving

20 Questions: Think of a person or object and give your child 20 chances to narrow down what you’re thinking of by asking yes or no questions. To help them improve their logic and reasoning, teach them to strategize by using questions that will significantly narrow down the categories, such as “Are they alive?” or “Do we have one at our house?”

What it helps: Logic, reasoning, memory

Rhyme Time: Have your child choose four rhyming words and use them to create a poem. For younger kids, simply say a word, then take turns coming up with words that rhyme with it.

What it helps: Auditory analysis, verbal rhythm, memory

Make a Mental Movie: Start with a subject like a puppy and then have your child help create what the puppy looks like; his size, shape, color, etc. Have your child talk about where the puppy is; next to a doghouse, in the forest, etc. Then have your child add other details such as the weather or what the dog is saying. By developing pictures with color, size, perception, sound, and background, kids learn how to develop a more complete picture.

What it helps: Comprehension, memory

The Twinkle Twinkle song: Have your child replace the words to “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” with state capitals. Want a twist for older kids? Have them include a rhyme at the end of each sentence. “Montpelier is the capital of Vermont state, and I think Phoenix, Arizona is great...”

What it helps: Mnemonics, memory, strategy, rhyming

Needle in a Haystack: Take a page from a newspaper and time your child as she circles all occurrences of a specific letter. Identify which sound symbols are more easily found than others and focus on increasing both accuracy and speed.

What it helps: Visual processing speed, sustained attention



Physical Exercises that Energize the Mind and Body

No reason you can't incorporate brain training into every day activities! These exercises require a trip to the great outdoors, or at least a move off the couch. These were created by LearningRx, the brain training experts. Give them a try, and then come up with your own variations.

Counting Counts – Encourage your child to count by 2's, 3's, 4's, 5's etc. when they go up or down stairs. He should say the next number aloud every time his foot hits the floor. This also works while dribbling a basketball (next number every time the ball hits the floor), while swinging on a swing set (next number every time on the forward peak), and while jumping rope (new sum every time the rope hits the ground). This helps with math fluency, divided attention, and memory. Doing it on-beat to an activity will build processing speed as it forces the brain to quickly come up with the answer.

Another version involving lists creates endless possibilities. On beat to an activity, name 15 words that start with "B", nine types of sports, seven kinds of candy, etc.

Trampoline Time – Use this time to work on math facts, states and capitals or opposites. This should be rapid-fire. Every time your child bounces they provide an answer, then you immediately give the next prompt, which they have to answer on the following bounce. For example, you say "Montana", they respond "Helena" on the next bounce. Then you say "Alaska", and they respond "Juneau" on the next bounce. This builds the mental skills of divided attention and processing speed.

To add a memory aspect, quickly give your child five states in a row, and they give the five capitals in order on their next five bounces.

For a math variation, give a constant number to add, such as five. You say three, she says eight. You say one, she says six. This works will with multiplication too.

Jacks – This brain-building playground game originated hundreds of years ago and is still a winner. The old-fashioned version with a rubber-ball and 10 spiked "jacks" will help build visual processing skills, processing speed and attention. To work on divided attention, have your child count, recite a poem, or give directions while taking her turn. To build selective attention, try to distract your child while she's playing with silly questions, funny faces or obnoxious noises.

Abstract Storytelling – Have your child demonstrate a story, such as "Humpty Dumpty," by using objects from around the house like paper clips, cups, pillows, chairs, etc. to represent items and thoughts from the story. For older kids, make this more difficult by having your child demonstrate more abstract thoughts. Adages, clichés, or famous quotes work well, such as "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." or "No news is good news." This helps with executive thinking, comprehension, and visual processing.

Computer Games that Count

When the lazy afternoons of summer come calling, don't waste them on brain-draining video games. Instead, turn to these free brain-building online games that entertain and help grow cognitive skills at the same time. This list has something for every interest and age group and is provided by LearningRx, the brain training experts.

1. Primary Games – www.primarygames.com

A gold mine of fun games including sliders, swappers, tangrams and strategy puzzles, plus a teacher's key to let you know which games work best for which ages.

2. Games for the Brain – www.gamesforthebrain.com

If your kid loves games, this is one of the best sites on the Web. A wide variety includes Mahjongg Solitaire, Chinese Checkers, trivia games and even crime scene scenarios.

3. Fun Brain – www.funbrain.com

This colorful site lets you search games by grade or browse by subject. Web books and comics, movies, classic fun brain games (grammar, math, reading), and bold graphics and popular cartoon characters keep kids interested.

4. Kaboose – <http://education.kaboose.com/tutoring/brain-index.html>

The tutoring section of this Web site offers educational games for kids, as well as word puzzles, language builders, online stories, musical games and mazes.

5. LearningRx – www.learningrx.com

This site for LearningRx, the national "brain-training" franchise system, offers free downloadable copies of *Think Magazine* and *LearningRx Magazine* that contain fun brain-building games to take on the road or use at home.

6. The Kidz Page – www.thekidzpage.com/freekidsgames/

You can find clip art, puzzles and games for kids of all ages including strategy, word, sports and memory games, board games, card games and more.

7. Kids Sites – www.KidsSites.com

This clearinghouse of Websites includes a section of games for younger kids.

8. Crayon Physics – www.kloonigames.com

This visual processing game uses your crayon-drawn objects to obey the laws of physics.

9. Math.com – www.math.com/students/puzzles/puzzleapps.html

This is touted as "A world of math online." Games like Peg Solitaire, a maze generator, and other math-based games are free, but registration is required.

