

Balancing a Sensational Summer

Teeter... complete structure in the summer. *Totter*... kids should be free and able to sleep, play or do whatever they want, whenever they want. So, how do you reach a balance between the two? A child is a child, whether your child has Sensory Processing Disorder or not, and summertime provides an opportunity to play, explore and enjoy childhood. However, our children with SPD may need some help to achieve the “just right” balance for the summertime.

Children usually require about 6 weeks at the start of a school year to recoup the academic skills lost over the summer. Our children with SPD face a similar challenge, as they often don't have the internal “framework” to retain these skills over an unstructured time such as the summer. When we were children, the idea of total freedom made summer a much anticipated time. However, for our children with SPD, total freedom is not something that is easy to manage.

The optimal summer time experience for our children with SPD is insured by providing a balance for them... not totally structured or unstructured. The challenge is for parents to be intentional as they begin to plan the summer for their children. We, at the STAR Institute recommend lots of play, but parents need to determine the type/types of play that most benefit their child. The highest success is usually achieved from a combination of experiences. For instance, there may be a fun play time in the water at a neighborhood pool, but then swimming lessons may be a way to achieve fun and motor skill development as well. If it is managed well, a child feels all of this is fun and summertime play!

There is always a question concerning how much structure to impose at home. Children rely heavily on the structure of school to create a rhythm and support them during the school year. Certainly in the summertime, the structure at home is much less, but we find that some structure is very helpful. For our children with sleeping issues, we still recommend a consistent bedtime and wake up time. It certainly isn't as rigid as the school year, but the structure does help them maintain an internal biological rhythm to their wake/sleep cycle. Understandably there are special occasions when bedtimes aren't enforced, but this should be viewed as a “treat” rather than an everyday event.

Mealtimes also provide a special challenge in the summer. Children often graze rather than eat at set mealtimes. Grazing may not be the best strategy for nutrition, as children may not experience the biological rhythm of hunger and the need to eat. However, for less formal mealtimes, better nutritional components can be achieved by arranging food categories on shelves or in boxes so children may select one from each shelf/box to create a more balanced meal on the run. The ability to start and stop is a basic regulatory strategy that applies to eating, but carries over to other parts of life as well. The more opportunities children have to utilize this regulation, the more automatic the skill will become in their everyday lives.

There is a question about whether to continue academic practice in the summertime. Again, this can be achieved with a balance. Academic activities may be designed to be more fun rather than specific skills practice. For instance, activities such as cooking can utilize math skills and at

the end, there is something fun to eat! Keep in mind, there are some children who need practice in order to prevent regression in specific academic skills. It is usually most successful to choose 1 or 2 major areas to work on such as handwriting, math or reading and to define a daily amount of time for the work. We recommend no more than 15 minutes on any subject and suggest that you limit practice to one half hour for all activities. The first challenge for a parent is to deal with the child's reaction to practicing during the summer time. We address this through a visual demonstration of the time that practice will really take place. We take a pile of 96 small objects such as marbles, M&Ms, small toys, etc. (This represents the number of 15 minute segments throughout a 24 hour day). When discussing the plan with the child, a parent can explain that 15 means a very small part of their day and then demonstrates the concept by removing one object from the very large pile. This helps the experience of summer work seem more manageable and acceptable to the child. Certainly, rewards such as stickers may help as well. There can be a bigger reward as a certain number of stickers are collected and can be turned in for a special treat such as a swim day, picnic in the park, special time with mom or dad, etc.

The outside world in the summertime provides a perfect playground to explore and refine sensory skills. Whether it is hiking, swimming or drawing on the driveway with chalk, they all provide joint and muscle feedback. Exploring in a park and touching/smelling trees, flowers and rocks provides an understanding of and exposure to different textures and smells, but in a natural and fun setting. A sense of "how fast" can be practiced in stop/go, fast/slow games, on land and in the water. This will support a regulated state so a child can fully take and experience all of the wonders found during summer.

One of the most significant changes that can occur over a summer is a child's growth from one social level to another. The "developmental challenge" in the beginning of the school year is for a child to have adequate skills to deal with higher level social challenges. For instance, we see that our children who advance from 2nd to 3rd grade require higher-level social skills to begin to discuss more complex feelings and experiences. There are small groups that begin to form which rely on adequate social skills of the members. So, for children who may not have age level social abilities, the summer time is a great time to enhance these skills.

Social interaction is an area in which a parent needs to be "intentional" and consider the child's strengths and needs in order to build success. For instance, some children require supported social situations such as having one peer join him/her in a structured activity such as bowling, an art project or at a museum. The adult can support the conversation between the children and insure success. As a child's social skills grow, more peers can be added or the activities can become less structured. There are numerous, fun classes for children throughout the summer, which provide activities as well as a built-in social groups. While working on social skills, the goal is to provide greater success and independence in a child's ability to interact with others.

As a child develops, he/she gains the ability to empathize about the circumstances of others as well as being able to do something about it. Summertime doesn't have so many time constraints, so it is an ideal time to think about ways to give to others in need. As we celebrate the 30th year of the STAR Institute, we encourage children to become involved in the future of

STAR as well. Fundraising activities that children can be a part of may include:

- Garage Sale- gather and sell items together.
- Sensational Reading Time- have families or friends pledge a certain amount for each book the child reads over the summer.
- Sensory Fair- done like a carnival, design activities that require use of senses.
- Back yard Olympics- charge a small entry fee for participants, sell tickets for “the crowd” and sell refreshments or other “souvenirs”.
- Sensory Walk- charge a small “walking tour” fee. An adult can be a “guide” and child a “junior guide” to lead a walk around the neighborhood, local park and teach others to experience it through the senses; see/feel/hear things that haven’t been noticed before.

The variety of summer activities is endless, but choosing the “best fit” for children with Sensory Processing Disorder takes time on the part of parents. The investment of your time now can result in an exciting fun filled summer for your child and the entire family.