



Making the Most of Summer Vacation

Who doesn't love summer vacation? But when a child has special needs, all that free time brings challenges. Youngsters who thrive on routine can find schedule changes disorienting. Some may become socially isolated without classes to attend. And, of course, if their life skills and academic work aren't being consistently reinforced, months of hard-won progress could be reversed.

A summertime activity designed to foster social skills has blossomed into a filming job and national tours.

It takes planning to make the most of summertime opportunities. First and foremost, what does your child enjoy? Ask them for suggestions. Perhaps your child is all about being in or on the water, whether it's a pool, ocean, river or lake. Others might be happier visiting a museum, some of which are beginning to offer programs designed for those with special needs.

Wondering how to help your child maintain the school year's hard-earned skills? Look to the IEP and consult teachers about what to focus on. Assisting with chores can maintain-or even improve-life skills. If appropriate, ask them to take part in planning and preparing meals. Bring them to the grocery store to assist with shopping.

Set aside time to practice math, writing or other academic subjects. You may want to consider a tutor. Games (board or computer-based) and puzzles are fun ways to build critical thinking, coordination and visual perception. Backyard sports teach how to follow rules. Play dates are a way of learning how to relate to others.

Nurturing an Interest

One SNA member has a son whose disabilities made it hard for him to make friends when he was a child, so she organized camping, go-carting and laser tag outings to help him learn social skills. But it was skateboarding that made the biggest difference. He had real talent, so she began taking trips with three or four other boys who shared his interest. They'd go from one skate park to another, and eventually he developed a tight circle of buddies. He was so good that skate clubs began sponsoring him and he got a part-time job filming for a skateboarding magazine on its national tours. He began making his own videos-sometimes filming with a handheld camera while skating alongside others. A recent video, starring him and his pals, opened to a sold-out crowd at a local theater.

Check out community programs. School staff and other parents may be able to suggest activities that have worked well in the past for kids with special needs. But don't dismiss other programs offered by parks, libraries or recreation centers. With the right resources, upfront planning and coordination with the organizers, many events for the general public can provide your child with wonderful experiences. If they're uncomfortable when faced with new situations, try bringing along a friend.

At this point, most camps are booked up, but it's not too late to take steps to ensure that your kid has a good time. Establishing a good relationship with camp staffers is key to the experience, so get to know as many of them as you can. Share information about your child's disability and specific needs. Figure out who your main contact will be for day-to-day communications and whom you should call when you have concerns. Let them know how to reach you at any time.

Family Vacation

Families are often anxious about vacationing in unfamiliar places, but planning well in advance can do a lot to ease the way. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act requires hotels to "be accessible," ask detailed questions. Is there a shower chair? Do you need a bed that's a certain height? Beach areas may rent "fat tire" wheelchairs for the sand, and many cities provide "kneeling" buses. Although hotels and restaurants are legally required to admit service dogs, you may want to call ahead to avoid delays.

Vacations should be planned with all family members in mind. If you have more than one child, you may choose to take two cars. That way, you can cater to different interests or, if one of them becomes over-stimulated, go someplace less stressful.

Whether your summer involves a stay-vacation or traveling, the same advice applies: plan ahead with your child's specific needs and interests in mind. If you do, you'll increase the likelihood that a good time will be had by all.

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