

OPINION

Four ideas to support your child's mental health this summer

Prevent the “summer slide”



By Jon Chapman

Our children's mental health is a [national emergency](#). After two years of the pandemic, the situation is getting worse.

As the calendar turns from May to June, we hear a lot about a “summer slide” in academics, the idea that without regular academic rigor, students' core learning skills atrophy. We need to also urgently

address a summer slide in student mental health.

While summer break can offer a respite from some of the stress students face during the year, it can also mark a more dangerous time when the structure and routine of school, often the first line of defense for student mental health, is replaced by comparatively unstructured and unsupervised summer activities.

For some, that disruption offers new experiences and growth, but for many others, it's a challenging time, with additional stressors in their home that can create or exacerbate mental health issues.

As summer approaches, now is the time to focus on ways to help your child maintain and improve their mental health. Here are four simple tips that may help.

Avoid too much unregulated time on social media

While it's probably unrealistic to stop your teens from using social media altogether, talk to your kids about how they're using it. It's important they understand social media use is a privilege, not a right. Most kids significantly underestimate their screen time and need help setting limits.

Social media triggers dopamine, a natural "feel-good chemical" that keeps kids engaged with their devices. To counteract the dopamine-induced pull, encourage other things that bring them joy. These can be as simple as being with friends, playing with a dog or playing a sport.

Get up, get out, and get moving

Prioritize physical wellness and encourage kids to get outside every day. Time spent in nature and sunshine can improve mental health and sharpen cognition. Further, encourage children to participate in activities they enjoy such as gardening, hiking, playing sports or just unstructured play — anything that keeps them active. Most parents have to work through the summer and can't match their children's flexible schedules. If you have a community of friends, family or neighbors, engage them and offer to rotate supervising groups of kids, which will ease the time commitment of all.

Teach compassion

Compassion is an important social-emotional skill that begins to develop in early childhood and is essential for lifelong health and success. [Recent studies](#) show that random acts of kindness strongly affect well-being and, encouragingly, younger givers report higher levels of overall well-being and psychological health.

Speak with your child about what compassion means to them and how they can give back to their community. Engage with your children in acts of compassion such as helping an elderly neighbor carry bags or tend to their yard, volunteering at a food bank or anything else that helps others without anything expected in return.

Encourage a routine

Help your child keep a routine to create an easy transition back to school and improve overall mental health during the summer. This includes getting dressed, eating meals and having a consistent routine throughout the week. There's no harm in letting your child sleep in some days or simply relax, but try to get into a morning and nighttime routine that's as close to their school schedule as possible, especially a month before class starts.

And here's a bonus tip we could all stand to hear these days: [Take care of yourself!](#) You can't be a good resource for your kids if you aren't first taking care of yourself.

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