

# Summer Enrichment or Just Hanging Out?

## What Parents Should Know About Extended Learning Opportunities

By Dr. J. Denise Drain & Melissa Hasan

*Summer program registration typically starts in January or February—it's not too soon to think about summer!*

As parents, we often worry about our overscheduled children. How much is too much? Should they have time off during their breaks from school? Should they attend academic, music, or sport camps? Hang out with friends? Vacation on Grandpa's farm? Go to the beach? Of course, children and adolescents need time alone to just be themselves, but how many of us have heard, "I'm bored. I don't have anything to do," after a week of downtime? This article provides an overview of current research and a look at the sampling of available enrichment pro-

grams for gifted children and adolescents.

Research has shown that summer learning based in family and community activities increases students' school achievement. Students who participate in summer learning activities—whether camp-based, community-based, or family-based—score higher on their fall achievement tests than students who are left to their own devices during their free time (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2007). This research suggests that the achievement gap is substantially linked to unequal learning opportunities in children's home and community environments, especially during summer months.

Although learning gains during the school year for students who participate in out-of-school activi-





ties is nearly equal for those who do not, students who do not participate in learning activities often lose more than 2 months of reading achievement during a typical summer vacation. The authors also found that *all* students lost more than 2 months grade-level equivalency in math over the summer, even those participating in learning activities. Finally, Alexander et al. (2007) found that as much as two thirds of test score differences could be traced to summer learning differences during elementary school and that these differences continued into high school and even college.

Note that studies do not suggest we should put our children into the traditional school setting year-round (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Activities during school vacations should include games, field trips, enrichment, and *fun*. These activities should connect to academics, while not necessarily resembling a typical classroom setting. Successful out-of-school learning experiences combine new ideas, places, relationships, hands-on opportunities, application of knowledge, and encouragement for students (Quinn, 2002). Many of the summer programs available for gifted students combine content acquisition with creative and critical thinking processes and authentic encounters. They may also provide significant social experiences with an academic peer group not available in the student's school environment. Students often come away from these programs having made lifelong friends who share their deepest interests.

Summer programs should build on children's interests and expertise. They may give children and adolescents an opportunity to develop expertise in areas such as sports, visual and performing arts, music, and academics. Being engaged in their own learning increases motivation and helps children to develop goals and positive attitudes toward their abilities (Miller, 2007). Programs specifically

designed for gifted students require sustained attention, flexibility, and persistence—all of which are important executive functions that gifted students may not utilize throughout the regular academic year (Hasan, 2013). Time spent doing high-interest work with other gifted students also offers opportunities for greater intellectual challenge and stimulation, as well as peer support for academic excellence (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2007).

A child's social competence may also be developed through participation in summer programs of sufficient length (2 weeks for residential, 3 weeks for commuter; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2007). Social competence and emotional well-being are intertwined with cognitive abilities, and have been shown to provide a strong foundation for cognitive learning. Summer programs provide students with opportunities to meet and work with peers who have many of the same interests and abilities. Through interactions with these peers, social competence is developed.

Although traditional summer school learning has been shown to provide small gains (especially in math; Sunmonu, Larson, Van Horn, Cooper-Martin, & Nielsen, 2002), those gains seem to disappear by the end of the next school year. For gifted students, there are programs available that delve deeply into math concepts in order to promote *understanding* as opposed to *memorization*. These programs, which are vastly different from traditional school math programs, may be enrichment or acceleration programs. In enrichment classes, students may be introduced to advanced topics, such as calculus, at early ages



in a manner that moves students from concrete perceptions to abstract understandings. Acceleration programs allow students to master a module of mathematics that typically is completed over the course of a school year.

Studies also suggest summer academic camps that are carefully designed and implemented can make a difference in preventing summer learning loss and promoting lasting learning gains (Miller, 2007). A number of universities have specialized camps for gifted students—some are commuter camps, some are residential camps, and some are a blend of the two. Nonprofit organizations and for-profit organizations provide camps as well, although some have scant research to validate the effectiveness of their programs.

In order to be successful, VanTassel-Baska (2007) suggested a number of nonnegotiables that programs for the gifted must include. First, personnel must be a trained team of leaders with an understanding of the subject matter and the characteristics and needs of gifted children and/or adolescents. Second, a high-quality differentiated curriculum should be based on best practices in gifted education as well as the interests of the students. Third, the program should include an evaluation system of the students' growth and the program overall.

### Summer Opportunities

Summer activities can vary widely by location, type, focus, and duration. Many private studios offer day camps for dance, gymnastics, music appreciation, or art. These are often in the week-to-week format, where students may or may not have the same peers each week. Colleges and universities often offer 1–2-week sports camps that tend to be residential. Museums and zoos also offer some day camp opportunities. Although none of the above offerings specifically target the gifted, they may provide the gifted learner with positive peer interaction and an opportunity to develop expertise in less traditionally academic realms. Hands-on science and technology camps are also cropping up nationwide (such as Camp Invention and Mad Science), although these generally group students by age and grade level rather than ability.

Parents are fortunate that today there are many more camps and opportunities designed especially for gifted students. These programs have the added benefit of allowing children and adolescents to meet others with their same interests and ability level. So, whether you decide to have your child attend a camp or create your own “summer intensive,” gifted children and adolescents need opportunity to engage in intellectual challenge, to develop friendships with intellectual peers, to support and nurture intense interests, and to explore other fields and cultivate new interests. ☘

### References

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### Resources

- National Association for Gifted Children,  
<http://giftedandtalentedresourcesdirectory.com/>

### Author’s Note

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