

Summer Learning

How parents can use media to keep kids active, educated learners all summer long.

BY FRANK GALLAGHER



IT'S SUMMERTIME AND THE LIVIN' IS EASY. NO SCHOOL, NO HOME-work, no tests—an excuse children sometimes use to turn off their brains. Educators have long been concerned about summer brain drain, where children forget a lot of what they spent the past nine months learning. And that means a goodly chunk of time in the fall is devoted to re-teaching last year's curriculum.

One of the functions of a summer reading list is to keep children engaged in reading and honing their skills. Summer reading can also expose kids to new information, ideas, voices, and viewpoints; encourage them to follow their interests; and keep those growing brains active. The same rationale applies to creating a summer media list and using excellent, educational TV programs, Web sites, games, and CDs to keep children thinking and growing while school's out.

Active Media Use

What? Watch TV and play video games all summer? No—of course kids should spend time at the playground or in the pool. Visit a museum, community center, and your local library. But there's also a place for a summertime family media plan that helps children apply the words and ideas they've already learned and encourages them to learn new ones.

The best children's programs have been shown to teach intellectual skills and pro-social attitudes, in part, because they engage viewers and stimulate thinking. Children are asked to respond, sing along, and do things with the characters on TV. In short, they become active viewers, using new information and relating it to what they already know. When teachers use video, they include an activity or ask questions before, during, and after viewing—all designed to make certain children are learning the intended information.

So what can you do to set up the conditions that will help your children learn what you want them to?

Watch TV and use computers with your child when you can, and use pre-selected Web sites, programs, or videos when you can't.

Ask questions that will get them thinking about the media they're using and the things they're learning (see box, next page).

Use the parental control features that often come with your TV, cable set-top box, and Internet subscription to screen out objectionable content when you just don't have the time to watch with them.

Finding the Good Stuff

So how does one find resources that are appropriate, enjoyable, and educational? A wide variety of educational media has been created just for children. Cable in the Classroom programs are a commercial-free, educational safe harbor, and there are many other programs that mix education with entertainment (see page 10). Parents can use their VCR or DVR to record the best programs for viewing at a convenient time.

To block inappropriate TV shows and Web sites, parental controls and filtering software can be used (see page 9). Since January 2000, every television over 13 inches has contained a V-chip, which allows parents to block programming based on the TV ratings system. Digital cable set-top boxes give you even more control, permitting you to block whole channels or specific programs or all the shows that fall within a particular TV ratings category. Most cable companies will also provide free blocking technology to analog subscribers

who request it. ControlYourTV.org, a new site managed by Cable in the Classroom, is a great place to learn how you can use the V-chip, TV ratings, and set-top boxes to control what your children see; find family-friendly educational programs; and delve into media literacy.

Here are some more tips to picking the best programs and resources.

From Dickens to Dr. Seuss: Look for dramatizations of a favorite children's book or of works by a favorite author.

Ask the teacher: Seek out programs that relate to topics that were covered this year or will be taught next year.

Consult librarians: At your local library or school media center, librarians can point you toward resources that let your children explore their favorite topics, suggest new avenues to explore, and recommend a terrific list of great Web sites for kids.

Use your VCR or DVR: If you record programs, children can play outside when it's sunny and use the video when it's raining or when you can't watch with them.

Choose prescreened resources: In addition to Cable in the Classroom and the American Library Association, Yahoo!igans, KidsNet, Kids First! and others recommend educational programs and Web sites for kids.

6 Steps to a Family Media-Use Strategy

"Navigating the Children's Media Landscape: A Parents' and Caregivers' Guide," a new report commissioned by Cable in the Classroom and the National PTA, is grounded in media literacy and offers ideas and strategies to help parents and caregivers select and use media with their families in developmentally appropriate ways. The report features a balanced, six-step approach for creating a family media-use plan that ties media selection to a child's developmental stages.

- 1 Identify your current family media practices.
- 2 Consider the unique stages and needs of your children.
- 3 Educate yourself about the children's media landscape.
- 4 Select media for your family with purpose.
- 5 Encourage active, creative, and open-ended use of media.
- 6 Teach your children media-literacy skills.

The report is available at www.ciconline.org/navigate or www.pta.org/medialiteracy

We can all use some time to relax, but that's no reason to put your brain in hibernation. Asking thoughtful questions and selecting excellent, educational, and entertaining books, TV shows, movies, CDs, and online adventures for your children can make summer a time of learning as well as fun. And using critical-thinking skills is not only good practice for when children are back in the classroom come fall, but will also serve them well as they use media throughout life. <

Active Media Questions



- > Ask your children what they saw and heard. It will help them practice storytelling skills and allow you to correct misperceptions.
- > Who's telling the story? What might be different if another character told it? *Why* is the story being told—is it to tell something or to sell something? On a Web site, can you tell who created it and why, and who the target audience is?
- > Ask how a story in a book would be different than in a TV show, movie, or video game. What can be done in print that can't be done on screen, and vice versa? What's missing or different?
- > Ask how a book, movie, or video game made your children feel. Did music, pacing, camera angles, lighting, or special effects make them feel happy, sad, or scared? On a Web site, look at how colors and graphics grab your attention. What can you tell about the importance of each item by the way it's presented and its location?
- > Evaluate a TV show, book, or Web site as a source of information. Does it help you learn what you wanted? Is it true? Is it unbiased? Help your children explore how they can tell if the information is accurate. Your librarian can give you tips on what to look for, or you can go online to Kathy Schrock's Guide for more Web site evaluation ideas.

For more ideas, go to www.ciconline.org/enrichment/medialiteracy

Related Resources

Control Your TV

www.controlyourtv.org

Information on parental controls, family-friendly programs, education, and more

Great Web Sites for Kids

www.ala.org/greatsites

American Library Association's compilation of educational and appropriate Web sites

Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators

school.discovery.com/schrockguide/eval.html

Resources to critically evaluate media

KidsNet

www.kidsnet.org

Information about educational TV, radio, Web, and multimedia resources for children, families, and educators

KidsFirst!

www.kidsfirst.org

Evaluations of quality videos for children, plus media-literacy information

National PTA: Parent Involvement: Parent Talk

www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/parenttalk

Scroll to the bottom for Making Sense of Media, listing links to a range of resources

Yahoo!igans

www.yahoo!igans.com

Yahoo's search engine for kids includes guides for parents and teachers

See Broadband Tools (pg. 9) and Quality Media for Kids (pg. 10) for more resources.