

Keeping learning alive during the holidays



With the summer holidays soon to start, how can parents keep their children's learning ticking over? Children returning to class 'cold' in September can feel their progress has really slipped after a summer off. Teachers, having ended the year with the class exactly where they wanted them, have to change gear and remember that they are back at the beginning of a new year's educational journey: a wake-up call for us all!

Happily, the holidays are a chance for all the school-based learning to be applied to real life situations. Children will do this without realising that they are using the skills developed at school. So with a little guidance, parents can stimulate learning without their children being aware they are continuing to learn.

The first thing to remember is that it is the holidays, in itself a chance for children to explore and learn for themselves. No greater learning happens than when children experience things first hand. If they are lucky, some children will leave their usual surroundings and be able to visit new areas of the country or world. These opportunities can enable children to discover new cultures and ways of life or just discover new parts of the UK.

But even if children remain at home, there is so much to discover in the back garden. Looking closely at flowers and drawing or painting them develops the skills of accurately recording and transferring information. Making tents and camps in the garden from old sheets gets the children to work out strategies to enable successful construction of their fortress! Children being imaginative and creating joy through interaction with others, or in their own play, is a pleasure to watch and can often

entertain for hours. This creative thinking is such a valuable asset in school when children have to write creative, inspired stories.

A holiday diary not only promotes writing skills, but calls to mind a whole host of curriculum subjects. Maps can be drawn of the area they are visiting, plans of towns, beaches and castles can all be added to the diary. Drawings and paintings can also be added to the diary to bring it to life. Sending postcards also supports and helps brevity skills and letter writing. Summarising the day's activities is a skill in itself developing a child's ability to write concise and succinct copy!

Working out what pocket money you have to spend also is an important feature of the holidays. I remember saving hard for a family holiday I had in Cornwall. On my first day I visited the shops and spotted a camera I wanted. What did I do, but beg my parents to let me buy it until my persistence wore them down. I then had a wonderful camera, but very little spending money left for the rest of the holiday. What a budgeting lesson I was taught!

When shopping, why not get the children to estimate the shopping bill and whoever is closest wins a prize? In the car, instead of constantly being asked 'Are we nearly there yet?' ask the children to guess the miles travelled from beginning to end.

As we know ourselves, holidays are a good time to catch up on reading. If you are not members of a library, go and join one. Good libraries often have many other things apart from books, magazines and CDs: perhaps author visits or story reading take place and provide a different environment for learning.

Holiday clubs are probably the most popular activity over the holiday and these are many and varied. They all offer something different, but usually have some educational aspect with, perhaps, the chance to learn a new sporting skill like sailing or rock climbing. These activities can lead to a lifelong love and a hobby and who knows, even Olympic success.

But what if - and we do live in the UK, after all - it rains? Well, there are many museums, science centres and indoor attractions to visit. However, don't discount outdoor activities: I had a thoroughly enjoyable visit to

Hever Castle in the pouring rain, getting absolutely soaking wet in the water maze. It didn't really matter as I was already soaked to the skin.

There are also internet sites which can stimulate the little grey cells, as Agatha Christie's sleuth Poirot would say. The BBC has a good range, especially <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/>. Once logged on there are numerous games and activities to keep both parents and children busy.

My last piece of advice is to get out as much as you can, don't worry about the weather and let the children explore!