

Summer Survival Skills For Parents?

Summertime can bring unruly kids and problems with siblings turning impatient and aggressive. Parenting advice for dealing with children during summer vacations.

A parent writes: The summer has barely begun and already my kids are having trouble dealing with all their free time. Moodiness, frequent arguments between the three of them, and miscellaneous aggravations are the order of the day. And I'm just referring to the time after camp! Any ideas for coaching "summer survival skills" for parents?

Unstructured Summer Vacations Means Unruly Kids

For many children, summer is eagerly anticipated as a time of boundless fun and fulfillment of their expectations. Sleeping late, lounging in front of the television, playing video or computer games whenever they want, or enjoying the outdoors to their heart's content may all appear on their list of perceived entitlements. The lack of homework and other structured activities further reinforces the perception of summer months as "time off" from work and "time for" the good life. Such unrealistic expectations set the stage for a host of problems that turn siblings into adversaries, produce unruly kids, and find parents deep in the trenches of child management.

Preventive Parenting Means Better School Vacations

Children's successful adjustment to the increased freedom of the summer can be made easier by parents who act preventively by employing the following coaching tips:

Rather than wait for kids to spiral downward in their behavior and mood as expectations collide with reality, talk about these issues ahead of time. Schedule a family meeting where you point out the challenges of the summer months in terms of increased sharing, turn taking, negotiation and compromise, and other skills that are more often needed during this time of the year. See if the kids can come up with some of their own strategies for sharing the computer, resolving disputes over sports games, borrowing items from one another, requesting their physical and verbal space not be violated, and other common sibling trigger points. Write down these problem areas and solutions so that they can be posted and serve as "Our family rules of conduct."

Some children benefit from more intensive mood management because of their less resilient personalities. Since summer time is not without its frustrations and annoyances, some children with brittle personalities can quickly succumb to fits of bitter protest and feelings of unfairness. These meltdowns are often the product of what parents may see as a typical, and often minor, frustration experienced by the child as a direct attack upon their entitlements. Mood management refers to strategic efforts by parents to activate a child's awareness of how their frustration is forcing them in the wrong behavior direction. State firmly and flatly, "It's time for you to make a choice between allowing your frustration to rule your reactions or controlling your reactions to your frustration."

Instruct children in how to resist getting entangled in the nets of arguing, moodiness and provocations by their brother or sister. One child's bad mood tends to be contagious. In effect,

children try to create the same negative feelings in others that they feel themselves. Parents can help preempt this process by coaching "know when to back off and ignore" skills when the bad mood alarm sounds. Privately confer with each child about the signs and signals to look out for in their family members so that they don't fall into the bad mood trap sprung by their sibling (or perhaps by a parent, as well.) Reassure them that this watchfulness will pay off in their not getting into trouble.

Be prepared to back up your management efforts with consequences. Unchecked negativity and/or hostility should not be tolerated by parents and other family members. Don't hesitate to enforce the rule that hot heads need private cool down time. Ensure that when children threaten the family peace they spend time by themselves to recover control over their reactions. Suggest that they spend at least five minutes in their room to take some deep breaths and tell themselves to put their bad mood behind them so that it won't spread to create more problems for themselves and others.

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