

Five Ways to Keep Your Child Learning Over School Break.

“Keep your child learning over school break!” sounds like a great idea. Yet the thought of spending quality time together with flashcards and assigned reading and endless worksheets may have you wishing for a blissful week of parking your child in front of a TV. Most parents aren’t trained as teachers, so being Teacher for a Week or a Month isn’t exactly an easy transition.

Still, speaking of transitions, we know it’s easier for our kids to get out of and back into school if they keep up some sort of a routine in between. A complete stop to anything academic makes it harder to get the brain into gear when class is back in session. So how do you keep your child’s learning going without turning a vacation into a constant screaming homework battle?

1. Play school.

Maybe your child would enjoy being the teacher for a change. Getting a “lesson” in what your child has been learning can either reassure you that classroom time is well-spent or highlight things your child still doesn’t quite get. Set up a daily class time, ask for help with your homework, have the “teacher” read you a story. It’s a way to keep up a classroom routine without you having to be the bad guy. And you might learn something!

2. Use school tools.

I asked my friend Carolyn Steiner, who is a regular- and special-education teacher in New York State, what she’d recommend for parents who wanted to keep learning going over breaks. She suggested using the same video games at home your child enjoys at school. “Twice a week of Dream Box will help keep their math levels where they should be,” she said, mentioning games used at her particular school. “They can use Raz Kids to help them stay at their reading level.

A very popular program is called Smarty Ants, which will help them with spelling. If they are going to be playing video games anyway, why not some of the educational type?”

Your child’s school may use different games, but chances are there are programs they are working through. Being able to play those at home can be exciting for kids, who now get to show off what they can do for a new audience. It will be interesting for you, too, to see what level your child achieves on these. While you may need to check in with your child’s teacher to find out what games to use and how to get into them, first take a look through all the papers that have come home this year and your notes from back-to-school night. Could be urls and passwords were distributed and you put it in the “Check this out eventually” pile.

3. Turn baking into a math lesson.

Move your learning time from the kitchen table to the kitchen appliances with a baking math lesson. Measuring ingredients is a perfect way to sneak in fractions practice. Divide the recipe requirements into smaller increments: How many quarter teaspoons do we need to get the one teaspoon we need? How many half cups for that two cups flour? Let's divide the dough in half, then in quarters, It's more like a game than a lesson, and there's something yummy at the end of it.

4. Play some games.

Children's games, in addition to being often endless ordeals for parents, often touch on the same skills they need at school. Your child can learn colors with Candyland or Uno, counting with games that move you around the board, math with dice or card games, spatial awareness with jigsaw puzzles, and turn-taking with pretty much everything.

You can turn a game like War into a full-on math lesson by creating new rules. Instead of the highest card winning, have each player put down two cards and award them to the player with the highest number when added, subtracted, multiplied, or divided. The game will still seem to you as if it goes on forever, but at least your child will be getting something more than time-passing out of it.

5. Plant your child in front of the TV.

Here we are again. But instead of seeing this as opting out of any productive learning, plant yourself right beside your child, soak in the same entertainment, and talk about it. Why are the characters doing what they're doing? How does your child think they feel about it? What would he or she do in that situation? Ask your child to describe the characters to you, and the situation the program is based on. You can get an "oral report" on even questionable pieces of literature. Bonding time, too.

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