

The Value of a Self-Directed Summer for Kids

It's all over the news these days. Kids are stressed-out, not playing, and, most worrisome, experiencing sharp increases in depression and suicide.

Last month, a new paper published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* revealed that adolescent mental health has deteriorated over the last decade, with soaring depression rates for young people ages 14 to 17. This month, a research paper published in *JAMA Pediatrics* found that between 2007 and 2015, the number of children and adolescents who visited hospital emergency rooms for suicidal thoughts and actions doubled. The average age of the suicidal child was 13. Dr. Gene Beresin, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston who was not involved with the study, told *CNN* in response to the new research. He said that

Kids are feeling more pressure to achieve, more pressure in school, and are more worried about making a living than in previous years.

So what can parents do?

Self-Directed Activities Reduce Stress

Childhood anxiety and depression can be linked to a high-pressure environment and not feeling in control of one's life and circumstances. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that anxiety and depression are a major concern for teens and that academics are a top stressor. Parents can help to reduce this pressure-cooker environment by prioritizing self-directed activities over structured, school-like ones. Summertime can be a great place to start.

Rather than continuing a schooled schedule of structured camps, adult-led enrichment activities, and academic catch-up, parents can use summertime to grant their children true freedom and agency. Let them be kids, with wide open days to fill as they choose, pursuing their own interests.

But won't they just play video games or stare at their smartphones all day? It's possible that after such a programmed academic year, young people may need to decompress a bit. Video games may be something that kids gravitate toward initially, as they often provide a sense of control sorely lacking from many young people's lives. Smartphones, social media, and other technologies are often vilified as exacerbating adolescent anxiety and depression—despite new research showing that this is not the case.

A key characteristic of a self-directed summer, though, is that if young people are given real freedom combined with the opportunity to explore and discover, they likely won't languish long in front of a screen. Laura Kriegel and Jack Schott, who run Camp Stomping Ground, a fully self-directed summer camp in New York, confirm this. Unlike most summer camps, Camp Stomping Ground allows young people to be fully in control of their camp experience.

Many activities are offered, but nothing is required, and it is possible that kids could just lounge around on their phones the entire time. But it just doesn't happen, say Laura and Jack. It's hard to stay sedentary and alone, they say, when giant shaving cream wars are happening outside or interesting, optional classes are offered with dynamic camp counselors. According to Laura:

Stomping Ground offers choice-based programming that lets kids decide, try and quit. This autonomy and trust build more authentic relationships and empower kids to be their best selves.

Enrichment Activities Can Be Counterproductive

Autonomy and choice are central to a self-directed summer, in contrast to the control and regimentation that define so many children's days all year round. Parents from all socio-economic backgrounds face mounting pressure to have their children's summer days filled with structured, and often expensive, enrichment activities; but poorer parents may confront the most coercion.

In an effort to close the academic achievement gap between poor and affluent students and prevent alleged summer learning loss, school districts across the country increasingly offer full-day, academic summer programs for low-income students. The result, however, is that poorer children may have even fewer opportunities for play and self-direction than their wealthier peers.

To overcome this disparity, and to help prioritize self-directed summer play for low-income, urban children, Janice O'Donnell launched Providence PlayCorps in Rhode Island in 2014. As the longtime director of the Providence Children's Museum, Janice lamented the loss of childhood free play she witnessed during her 30+ year career. To bring back play to urban neighborhoods, she implemented PlayCorps in public parks across the city. Kids can come and go as they wish to the designated parks that are staffed with young adults trained in play work.

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The facilitators, many of whom grew up in the city, are there if needed, but they know not to interfere with or direct the children's play. Instead, they offer various materials and creative supplies, like cardboard boxes, scraps of cloth, tools and "junkyard" materials, balls and ropes, and so on, that the children can incorporate into their free play if they choose. PlayCorps has been so well-received that it has expanded to include a self-directed after-school program during the school year, in addition to its summer program.

Parents and children alike feel the increased pressure of academics and enrichment activities. Parents want their children to succeed, and children don't want to let their parents down. This race to the elusive top, however, is causing many young people to experience severe anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. These kids may be "succeeding," but they're miserable. Parents can take charge and halt this pattern of overwhelmed and over-scheduled children. They can begin by using summer as a launching pad to a freer, more self-directed, more play-filled, and happier life for their children and teens.