

## Enhanced Screen Time

By Cathie Brooks

Summer break is approaching. Parental perspectives of these weeks that lack a static school-centered routine range from anticipation of unhurried family times to dread of the plaintive plea, "I'm bored!" Family vacations, Vacation Bible Schools and a variety of camps provide units of time which not only fill calendars but also promise opportunities to create memories, widen friendships and hone new skills. To keep reading and math abilities at or above their child's grade level many parents extend time limits on the computer and iPads, downloading a plethora of 'educational apps'.

However, often overlooked in this drive to plan and fill summer hours with a variety of positive activities is a screen time of a different sort. Summer is the perfect time to introduce children to the screened porch (or any suitable room in the house that allows) for a quiet, cool and **device free** play environment. It is on the porch, in times of self-directed play and solitude, that a child's brain synthesizes learning, strengthens creativity and undergirds important systems of independence and self-regulation.

This 'screen time' can best be used for summer afternoon fun, following mornings of swim team practice, camp activities or outside play. When the heat is up and a child's energy is down, a screened porch provides the perfect setting for quiet play. Research shows that a brain at rest is not an idle brain (Perspectives on Psychological Science). Unlike watching television, which pediatrician Dr. Bruce Perry calls both "passive and uncreative", quiet play requires focus and concentration. This focus often leads to "bursts of creativity and unique thinking" (Ivana Pejakovic, MA). Additionally, opportunities to practice focus and concentration allow a child to manipulate large concepts such as planning, action and consequence. For younger children this can be building towns with blocks, creating a fort or tent home with household items, using water colors to replicate pictures in a treasured book or completing a puzzle. For older children this can be a time set apart for required school reading, listening to an audio book (allowing a child to literally hear fluency, intonation and voice) or journaling.

While the benefits of a screened porch setting (or any device free room) are extensive, the mechanics of organizing this setting are simple - puzzles, art supplies, a few toys that foster imagination, books and opportunities for music are the essential components. This is a *less is more* setting with limited play choices and ease of pickup/cleanup time. Introducing children to the concept of self-directed play can be a tad more complex. For young children who are not comfortable in a room alone, parents can initially serve as a participant, guide or stage director. This support best comes in the form of open-ended questions such as "What do you think we should paint?", "Which author shall we read today?", "What can we use in this room to create a fort?" Beyond the joy of watching a child problem solve, parents may find that they can hear their child's *heart thoughts*. Playing and working together in a setting without concern for failure or grades allows children to see their parent as a partner,

collaborator and co-conspirator in fun! These times of collaboration may encourage communication paths that stay accessible into the school year.

Listed below are five starter ideas:

1. **Start small.** Begin with as little as 10-15 minutes of quiet play time. Be prepared to model how the time can be spent.
2. **Solicit planning help from your child.** Visit the library and select a variety of books, some on hobbies such as scrapbooking, techniques for doodling, some with riddles or jokes, biographies about people your child admires – anything that is a 'just for fun selection'. The library is a great source of audio books – a wonderful way to enhance listening skills.
3. **Fill a basket with one or two board games and a deck of cards.** Download game ideas and rules. Don't forget the pure fun of teaching a child how to play solitaire, manipulating real cards or the contagious fun of an ongoing Monopoly Game.
4. **Organize a simple set of art supplies – crayons, water colors, stickers and /or stampers.** Anna Pomaska has a coloring book with 45 incomplete illustrations, each with a creative prompt on completing the drawing. Her catalytic pictures may guide a child to his/her own creations and captions.
5. **Select a complex puzzle which will encourage teamwork and can be an ongoing project.** Puzzle mats provide for easy clean-up while keeping progress intact. Dover Publishing has a large selection of subject-oriented mazes, ranging from dinosaur mazes to alphabet searches. Your child may never realize that fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination and visual tracking skills will grow as they 'play'.

The voices advocating quiet play are many and varied.

- Dr. Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph. D., internationally recognized for his work on brain development and children in crisis writes, "Children need more solitude. By taking images, ideas and concepts from inside their own minds and reorganizing, sorting, and re-connecting in new ways, children create. One of the most important forms of play is playing with ideas. Abstract thinking is play."
- In her book, Endangered Minds: Why Our Kinds Can't Think, and What We Can Do About It, Jane Healy, Ph. D. sums up the need for this quiet time in a child's life:  
*"The quiet spaces of childhood have been disrupted by media assault and instant sensory gratification. Children have been yoked to hectic adult schedules and assailed by societal anxieties. Many have been deprived of time to play and the*

*opportunity to pursue mental challenges that, though deemed trivial by distracted adults, are the **real building blocks of intellect.***"

- The journal magazine, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, concludes, "Research indicates that when children are given the time and skills necessary for reflecting, they often become more motivated, less anxious, perform better on tests and plan more effectively for the future."

I encourage you to turn off the blue screens and metaphorically or literally open the screen door to a summer of enhanced learning with your child.