

be resilient

A publication of the Employee Assistance Centre

The summer of play

Parents will agree that school did not look the same this year. It's been a challenging time with profound adjustments for students, teachers and parents. While school can often be full of stress for children and teens – from peer pressure and bullying to the burden of homework – the pandemic has added another layer of stress. So as the summer approaches, it's the perfect opportunity for students to let go and focus on that which we've all struggled to find lately – time for play.

“Students have been coping with a significant amount of stress, with many feeling heightened alarm and some experiencing depression,” says Terry Warburton, a certified professional counsellor and parent consultant with Manitoba Blue Cross's Employee Assistance Program. “We know that mental health problems have been increasing due to the pandemic. Children and teens do not need more pressure put on them academically. Rather, they need time for their nervous systems to settle and experience rest.

“Summer break provides a classroom that is at least as important as the school classroom and probably more important. Parents can take a key leading role in helping summer to be one of rest,

recalibration, healing and play for their children and for themselves. Spending time on activities like going for a walk or run, getting creative, or becoming engrossed in an enjoyable activity can all be ways to help settle a child's or teen's nervous system,” says Warburton.

Our brains learn best when there is no sense of urgency and we're free to rest, use our imaginations and express our creativity, and that's why a summer free of stress, academics and achievement expectations is essential.

“Play is not a frivolous activity or waste of time. In fact, true play is necessary for social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. It is in the process of playing that the brain develops a better capacity to learn. It is the best way to prepare for school,” says Warburton, who specializes in child development and behaviour.

Play teaches children to experiment, develop independence and problem-solving skills, navigate social relationships and express their personality in a low-stakes setting. Play can also help manage negative emotions and release pent-up frustration and stress that may be boiling over after a long year.

Did you know?

This is a time of deep sorrow. A time of acknowledgement. A time for compassion and support.

The 215 children found at the former Kamloops Residential School has impacted us as individuals and as a community. For many, this event and the grief it has brought may trigger the lived or familial experience of residential schools, as well as other trauma and loss.

The Manitoba Blue Cross Employee Assistance Program is dedicated to supporting those impacted during this difficult time. Our intake lines remain open to assist and support anyone seeking counselling services.

*Those in immediate need can access support from a mental health professional through **Connect Now** without needing to commit to ongoing counselling sessions.*

*The National Indian Residential School Crisis Line has been set up to provide support for former students and those affected. Access emotional and crisis referral services by calling the 24-hour national crisis line: **1.866.925.4419**.*

*To access the Employee Assistance Centre or **Connect Now** can call 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586 or toll free 1.800.590.5553.*

Warburton is quick to note that playing video games falls into the entertainment category and is not beneficial in the same way. Play is most valuable when it is expressive and unstructured.

If there are concerns parents want to work on with their kids over the summer months, such as academia, anxiety or social issues, the focus on play is still key. Find fun, creative ways to tackle some of these harder topics, as adding pressure or coercion can elevate stress levels and decrease the chances of learning or strengthening the parent-child relationship.



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE
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Strengthening relationships

Summer offers the perfect opportunity for parents, as well as extended family and caregivers, to focus on strengthening their relationship with children. Kids and adolescents thrive when they are in a safe, caring relationship and feel taken care of, and when the adults in their lives demonstrate delight, enjoyment and warmth with them.

“The most important thing that children need is to know their parents ‘get’ them, love them like crazy and are on their side, no matter what. Summer is a great time to bombard kids with that message,” says Warburton. “When children feel this kind of love and connection, that is how their self-esteem grows. Focusing on relationship and play is the best way to help our children with intellectual, emotional, physical and social development.”

This time with family can also be a much-needed reprieve from peer relationships that can be challenging. Creating safe relationships with caring adults can be a positive way to teach children how to socialize in a respectful, considerate and loving manner.

“Summer is never wasted when the focus is on connecting with our kids, strengthening the relationship, and providing lots of room for creativity and play. The challenge is for parents to take the time and initiative to do this. One of the challenges can be that their kids are spending so much time with their friends or in front of a screen, which limits family time. Parents might need to get creative to create family time that kids want to be involved in,” says Warburton.

Ideas for creative play

- Let the kids play dress-up in your closet. Or, purge the clothes you don't wear anymore and ‘donate’ them to the kids for dress-up before sending them off to a thrift store.
- Stock up on art supplies at the dollar store. Place everything in a craft bin that's in an easy-to-access spot. Keep it interesting by adding a few new items every month.
- On warm days, water play is a great way to get kids outside and active. Water balloons are great for older children and teens, while the younger kids can enjoy a collection of bins,

buckets and containers to fill.

- Set up a toy exchange with friends. Kids enjoy new and interesting toys, but you don't have to break the bank to keep things fresh. Choose a selection of toys and ask a friend to do the same, swap for a month or two, then swap back. Your kids will enjoy toys that are new to them for a while, and when theirs are returned, they'll be ‘new’ again too.
- Role play games encourage maximum creativity and imagination. Playing school, restaurant, store, or pet sitter allows children to experiment with different roles and requires minimal equipment.
- Teens often enjoy expressing their creativity in their personal space. If your living situation and budget permits, consider buying a can of paint and allowing your teen to redecorate their room.
- Many kids and teens love the idea of starting a business, from a lemonade stand to teaching music lessons and everything in between. Summer is a great time to put ideas to action and even the tiniest business is an opportunity to get creative and have fun. Encourage kids of all ages to think about a small business idea that aligns with their strengths and interests.

It's important to remember that developing brains typically can't focus for as much time as adult brains can. So, if your children are bored with their craft supplies in an hour or are arguing after what seems like a short time spent in a role play game, don't despair. Any amount of time spent on play is valuable and it can be helpful to set realistic expectations based on your child's personality and age.

This summer make children's rest and recovery your aim by putting play at the top of your family to do list.

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca.

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Consult a professional (counsellor, physician, etc.) before taking action with respect to any topics discussed.

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