

Preparing for a Safe Summer: A “Top Ten” Mental Health Checklist for Parents

By Lucille Carr-Kaffashan, PhD



Effective School
Solutions

Since March 2020 when life's routines were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have struggled to keep their children safe and healthy in a time of enormous fear and uncertainty. No “How to Survive a Quarantine” guidebooks were available to help navigate the challenges of keeping children emotionally healthy while dealing with the stress of remote learning, social isolation, and the loss of recreational activities. Many parents found it especially hard to strike a balance with their children: What routines and structures should be kept, and which ones changed? Which rules and boundaries should be altered to reflect life's new realities?

As summer 2021 approaches, there are many signs of a return to normalcy, along with the realization that our perceptions of “normal” may be forever changed. For students, summer has always been a time to relax and re-set. Here are **Ten Tips** for parents who want to help their kids use this summer as a bridge to the resumption of full academic, social, and recreational schedules in the fall.

1. Get them outside! And while you're at it, get yourself outside too. Research shows that more time spent outdoors is associated with better academic functioning and emotional well-being. Being out in nature and physical activity are proven ways to boost positive moods and provide children with an outlet to discharge energy and anxiety.
2. Avoid the “it's summer, anything goes” approach, tempting though that might be after over a year of restrictions and loss. It is OK to come up with a summer schedule with altered bedtimes and mealtimes and chores, for example, but schedules and expectations should not be abandoned. Communicate the summer rules to your children clearly, and about two weeks before school starts, communicate the new rules that will start in the fall.
3. After a year of seclusion, plan as many social events as possible for your child. Social skills get rusty when not in use, and the tendency to avoid contact gets stronger for kids with social anxiety.
4. Foster a growth mindset: praise your children for their efforts and hard work, not for their gifts or talents. “I'm impressed by how much you practiced that piece on the piano”, not “You are a born musician”. “You studied so hard for that test”, not “You are really smart”.
5. If your child is on medication for ADHD or other mental health issues, stay consistent with dosages and administration schedules. Continue or initiate mental health counseling for your child if prescribed.

6. Limit screen time. After subtracting time needed for summer reading or academic work, limit hours for games, social media, and other screen usage. Create “screen free” times and zones that are followed **EVERY DAY**, for example, no phones during meals or in the bedroom for at least 1 hour before bedtime, “screen-free Wednesdays”, no screens in outside spaces, etc.
7. Allow your child to experiment and fail. Hovering too close, trying to protect children from all failures and disappointments, will interfere with their ability to be confident, resilient, and independent as adults.
8. Try something new – a new sport, a new game, a new place to visit, a new food.
9. Adopt what practitioners in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) call “walking the middle path”. Acknowledge and validate your child's fears, perspectives, desires, and beliefs while at the same time reinforcing rules, limits, and expectations. A few weeks before school starts, ask your child to discuss fears and concerns; brainstorm ways to ease the transition back to school.
10. **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF!** Re-establish social connections, resume hobbies and valued activities, schedule alone time, schedule long-postponed medical appointments, seek a parent support group and/or mental health counseling. Your health and well-being directly impact the health and well-being of your child.

Resources:

[Dr Jill Rathus and Dr Alec Miller on dialectical parenting during the pandemic | Psychwire](#)

<https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/want-to-raise-successful-kids-science-says-these-7-habits-lead-to-incredible-outcomes.html>