



Emerging Scholars

Supporting the Mental Health of School Children During the Summer Months

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Abstract

The summertime, though a time for children to relax from the stresses that come with attending school, also poses a challenge for maintenance of their mental health due to loss of routine and regular social interaction, increased access to electronics, and the possible exposure to unsafe environments and food insecurity. This manuscript explores research discussing the risks that students may encounter through the loss of school-based supports and structure including higher rates of mental illness, increased social isolation and increased sedentary behavior. Content includes strategies stakeholders may consider and employ to best support students' mental health, such as leveraging community programming, ensuring continued access to mental health

services and encouraging outdoor play throughout the summer months. Accessibility of summer support strategies is considered as well as options appropriate for children across the economic spectrum are provided.

Keywords: Summer Break, Children, Mental Health, Accessibility, Structure

Supporting the Mental Health of School Children During the Summer Months

The summer holidays provide a wonderful reprieve from homework, classes and waking up early for most students. Simultaneously, the summer months may pose unique obstacles to students' mental health when considering the lack of structure and routine school provides, as well as the loss of access to school-based mental health care services. This gap in service may be especially felt by students facing financial barriers to receiving private mental health care in the summer, those without mental health care providers in their vicinity and by other relevant stakeholders who may not otherwise know how to support their children's mental health throughout these months. This manuscript examines the prospective effects of the mental health of children during the summer months. Content provides different approaches for parents and guardians, educators, communities and policymakers to support children's mental health and overall well-being during the summer months.

Understanding the Risks

Loss of Structure and Routine

Stakeholders should be aware of the concerns surrounding a sudden loss in structure and its possible adverse effects on the emotional and mental state of children. While children are in their academic year, structured routines help regulate their activities, sleep, and even meals, overall supporting their well-being. The end of the academic year disrupts this routine. Children's mental health tends to decline following the summer holidays (Kromydas et al., 2022), which is supported by a trend of elementary-aged children to exhibit less healthy behaviors on weekends compared to weekdays (Brazendale et al., 2017). Children do well with structure and routine, as it promotes overall social-emotional and mental wellness, meaning a loss of these elements may negatively affect them (Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2023).

Reduced Social Interaction

Children rely on the school year which allows them to benefit from an environment that facilitates daily social interactions. Regular social interaction through the summer endorses greater self-perception, social-emotional outcomes and mental health in children and adolescents, particularly those from disadvantaged communities (Eglitis et al., 2024). Negative emotions like loneliness and isolation can be heightened during the summer months due to the lack of a structured social environment. Without caretakers, communities, and relevant stakeholders facilitating opportunities for social engagement, children may more strongly feel the ramifications of this summer isolation.

Limited Access to Mental Health Services

Though a school's primary function is to be a place of learning, it simultaneously serves to monitor and support students' mental health. A report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2016) found approximately 15% of teens, or 3.7 million teens, ages 12-17 received school-based mental health care services, rising from 12.1% in 2009, or 2.9 million teens. During summer break, however, these students may lose access to these mental health services, which may impact those living in rural areas or lower socio-economic status (SES) more disproportionately due to traveling long distances for care and inability to afford care or inability to accommodate parents' working schedules, respectively (Graves et al., 2024; Hodgkinson et al., 2016). The inability to access initial or continued mental health care could present negative consequences on the mental well-being of children and adolescents.

Increased Screen Time and Sedentary Behavior

Though summer breaks are typically pictured as being a time for children to be outdoors and with friends, it also provides more opportunities for increased interactions with electronic devices. Without the structure and schedule of school, smartphones, video gaming consoles and systems, and television could see increased use by children, contributing to higher screen-times in the summer as well as sedentary behavior (Brazendale et al., 2018). These behaviors are associated not only with elevated rates of obesity, but also with increased findings of mental illness, including mood disorders and depressive symptoms (Muppalla et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). The content a child consumes matters as well. Fast-paced, violent content has been linked with antisocial and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder-related behaviors (Muppalla et al., 2023). Stakeholders should be aware of and monitor screen-time and sedentary behavior due to their correlation with negative mental and physical health outcomes.

Food Insecurity and Unsafe Environments

In 2020, approximately 14.8% of U.S households with children faced food insecurity, marking a notable rise from the previous year (Hales & Coleman-Jensen, 2022). Some children rely on school for a nutritious meal. For some children, schools ensure daily access to meals and a safe and consistent routine. While children are on summer break, the inconsistency and instability of some households, especially underprivileged children, results in exposure to unsafe environments and increased food insecurity. This lack of access to reliable nutrition has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes in children, including heightened risks of depression, anxiety and behavioral challenges (Nagata et al., 2018). Additionally, the absence of school-mandated reporting when children are out of school leaves them more vulnerable to abusive, unsafe home environments. Baron et al. (2020) found a 27% drop in reported child abuse and neglect cases in Florida during the early months of COVID-19-related school closures, emphasizing the critical role school personnel assume in identifying and reporting abuse. This suggests that reports of child maltreatment do not decrease due to a lack of incidents, but more so because of an absence of school oversight.

Strategies for Supporting Mental Health During the Summer

Promote Routine and Daily Structure

Children need a reliable and consistent routine. A 2023 systematic review by Selman & Dilworth-Bart found family routines become associated with positive developmental outcomes in children, including improvements in cognitive function and emotional regulation. Stable environments, including routines and daily structure, enhance children's mental health through provisions securing safety which provide feelings of security, as well as increased emotional and social support (Yang et al., 2025). Important daily routines may include having daily schedules with specific times for tasks such as physical activities and set meal and bed times. Overall, these actions foster not only the stability, safety and security that children need for healthy development, but also the opportunity to incorporate routine bonding activities, healthy practices and open communication.

Facilitate Social Connections

Social interaction is crucial in children's emotional development and mental health. Research by Zhao and Gibson (2022) found that children who demonstrated stronger peer-play abilities at age three were significantly less likely to experience mental health difficulties, including behavioral and emotional problems, by age seven. These effects persisted even after accounting for variables such as socioeconomic background and parenting factors, further emphasizing the importance of early and consistent peer interactions. Children's early positive peer interactions remain critical toward their later mental health. Tepordei et al. (2023) demonstrated that the quality and quantity of peer relationships were positively associated with children's life satisfaction and academic motivation, suggesting that children who feel a stronger connection to peers are more likely to thrive emotionally and cognitively. To foster these connections during summer, caregivers encourage participation in community-based programs, schedule regular play dates, or support virtual connections with friends and family. These intentional efforts help maintain a child's sense of belonging and support their overall well-being in times when they do not have a regular routine.

Ensure Access to Mental Health Resources

Children's access to mental health resources is imperative, especially in the summer where mental health support may be lacking or more challenging to access. Though this may be difficult due to previously mentioned barriers, there are options to promote mental health care access when school-based services are not available. Social workers are available at some public libraries, which is especially valuable to those from lower SES due to libraries being available to patrons of all economic statuses (Soska & Navarro, 2020). For those in rural areas or facing obstacles related to physically seeking care due to geographic location or disability, virtual mental health care (telehealth) may be an option. Telehealth mental health care removes worries of travel, loss of income due to taking time off work, and is found to be generally feasible and accepted by clients in treating various mental health concerns (Doarn et al., 2020). Moreover, an additional, and perhaps more accessible, resource during the summer months could be a child's pediatrician. Pediatricians may perform mental health screenings during routine visits during the

summer and can even provide some forms of treatment such as psychoeducation, recommend or begin evidence-based practices such as promoting better sleep and nutrition, or even prescribe pharmacological treatment when necessary (Arruda et al., 2023). Though pediatricians' primary roles are not to be a mental health care provider, parents and children may find that mental health practices may still be integrated into some doctor visits, which may be a boon for those in need of basic services without access to additional resources.

Encourage Physical Activity and Outdoor Play

Dobbins et al. (2021) found that school-based physical activity programs may help boost both the number of children participating in moderate to vigorous exercise and the duration of their engagement, emphasizing the important ways schools encourage active lifestyles. Without the stability and reliable routine that school provides children, families may need to be more intentional about encouraging children to stay active. Physical activity is integral in framing children's mental health. Recent research by Yang et al. (2025) suggests that regular physical activity can help lessen the negative effects of sedentary behavior on both the physical and mental health of children. Encouraging and motivating outdoor play, sports, movement-based hobbies or active summer programs can help reduce stress, boost confidence and support social and emotional development during the summer months. Simple ways to incorporate physical movement and encourage outdoor play include visiting local parks, seeking out trails or going for walks as a family, or joining local outdoor recreation groups.

Limit Screen Time and Encourage Creative Activities

With the risks of excessive screen time in mind, it is in the best interest of children to limit their access to screens and instead, encourage partaking in more creative activities. Not only does participating in creative activities promote time away from screens, but it positively endorses problem-solving and higher self-esteem, especially in adolescence (Moreno & Del Mar Molero Jurado, 2023). Higher levels of self-esteem may be important in dealing with stressors, providing a protective factor against increased stress. Creative activities can also take many forms, which makes them accessible to those across different levels of SES and those with differences in access to resources such as physical space (e.g., living in an apartment in the city versus a house with a large backyard). Accessible activities may include reading, community clubs, crafting, or even more passive activities such as music-listening. These behaviors support not only higher rates of self-esteem, but also prosocial behaviors, decreased inattention, and healthy behaviors such as lower use of alcohol and cigarettes (Social Biobehavioral Research Group, 2023).

Support Emotional Expression and Communication

Fostering emotional expression and communication during the summer requires more than structured activities; it calls for meaningful conversations. Bell et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of everyday language as a powerful role in shaping children's emotional understanding. Using words like, "sad," "excited," "worried," helps children build the vocabulary and awareness needed to recognize, interpret and express their own feelings. Using this kind of language supports empathy and perspective-taking, skills often developed through peer interaction during the school year. During summer, when those interactions may decrease,

caregivers and community members can fill the gap by engaging children in conversations that explore feelings, intentions and motivations.

Leverage Community Programs

Community programs can be an effective way to get children out of the house, away from screens, and to maintain their interest and participation. These programs may be offered by municipalities or cities, universities, or institutions and provide grade-level or interest-specific camps, such as a film camp for young movie aficionados (Smith & Marquez, 2021; Young & Stockman, 2023). Other alternatives such as summer learning programs exist. For example, programs may be both academically and socially beneficial, offering a way to reduce loss of learning during the summer and prepare children and teens for the upcoming school year and as well as providing children with the opportunity to build and practice foundational social skills (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). Participation in social activities such as summer camps or other community programming is not only beneficial to mental health, but also physical health (Yang et al., 2016). Due to the free or low-cost nature of community programming, they provide a viable option for families across the financial spectrum (though their benefits are arguably priceless).

Prepare for Transition Back to School

Donaldson et al. (2022) examined 34 studies on school transition interventions; their goal was to improve the mental health and well-being among children. They discovered that social outcomes, like peer relationships and school belonging, were more responsive to interventions than behavioral or psychological outcomes (Donaldson et al., 2022). Interventions that targeted prioritizing, enhancing social support, and creating a sense of belonging were found to be more effective during the transition between school and summer break. Early transitions benefited from support in the paternal and school environment, and later transitions displayed better improvement with peer-focused strategies, showing that the effectiveness of these interventions varies by age. Parents consider the risks and prepare in advance for the summer months to ensure a smooth transition and return to school.

Conclusion

Summer provides unique mental health challenges for children and their caretakers, but accessible solutions are available. Loss of structure, reduced social interaction, limited access to mental health services, increased screen time, food insecurity and exposure to unsafe environments remain factors to consider during the summer months. Through intentional efforts by caregivers, educators, communities and policymakers, children can receive the support they need to thrive year-round. Strategies such as maintaining daily routines, encouraging social connection, providing access to mental health resources, promoting physical activity, fostering creative expression and leveraging community programs can all contribute to children's better mental and emotional outcomes.

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