



— Sample Op-Ed —

Summer Holidays No Time to Stop Learning

This op-ed uses an annual event, summer holidays, as an occasion to build public understanding of the importance of summer learning-based programming for young children, especially those from low-income communities without resources for posh private summer programmes. It opens with an appeal to the Value Social Responsibility, linking public support of such programmes to children’s well-being. From there, the piece uses the Explanatory Metaphor Brain Architecture, which compares brain development in the early years to the solid foundation of a well-built house, an effective analogy for increasing readers’ knowledge of the science of early childhood development. The entailments of this Metaphor, such as “construction materials,” introduce the idea of high-quality programming as an important piece of healthy brain development. To demonstrate the ways in which quality learning and care experiences influence children’s outcomes, the essay applies two additional Explanatory Metaphors, Weaving Skills Ropes and Serve and Return. Giving each Metaphor “room to breathe” helps to make them more effective. Wrapped into the piece at several turns is another important component of well-framed communications: Solutions, in particular, the expansion of well-funded community-based summer programming for young children. To leave people with a clear takeaway of why this issue matters, the op-ed closes with another appeal to Social Responsibility.

Summer is nearly here and our youngest residents are anticipating warm weather and never-ending play days in the sun. Longer days, a more relaxed schedule . . . what’s not to be excited about? As we head into the summer holidays, though, let’s remember that summer fun and games aren’t all summer fun and games. They’re also a prime opportunity to make sure we are doing all we can to help future generations’ healthy development.

In the weeks ahead, many families will be packing up their little tykes’ toys for visits to faraway relatives or sending the wee ones off to enriching day camps for tots. But many others will instead be counting on community programmes and initiatives to provide the resources and experiences kids need all year round to develop strong brains and bodies. We may wax nostalgic about the lazy days of summer, but brain building is hard work, and all children need our support to get the job done. For children in low-income communities, for example, more daylight hours and a break from regular school-year programming can mean less access to the kinds of stimulation their young brains need for continuing healthy development. To make sure they don’t fall behind their more well-to-do peers, we need to support local, community-

based programming that's thoughtfully planned and engaging.

Child development is a prenatal-to-adulthood process. Certain phases, like 0 to 5 years, involve rapid cognitive growth, as skills children need to become healthy, functioning adults are hardwired into the brain. It's essential during these early years to make sure children have access to the high-quality "construction" materials they need to create a solid foundation on which to build the skills and abilities they'll learn as they age. These construction materials include structured play, learning experiences that foster curiosity, opportunities to try new things in a supportive environment, and interaction with responsive adults as well as with other children. Summer programmes through community centres, local nonprofits, and other organisations often serve as the primary providers of these kinds of critical resources to many children who would otherwise be undeserved.

These programmes do more than look after young children; they aid their learning and development in key ways. For young children, learning happens through play in a development process akin to weaving ropes. Only, the ropes they weave are skills—cognitive, emotional, social, physical—that they need to function well both now and as adults. Each of these skills develops in tandem with the others, similar to strands of fiber woven together. So to build strong skill ropes, they need access to high-quality structured and unstructured learning and play. Such opportunities do not happen by accident. It takes well-planned, well-funded early care and community-based programmes to foster this kind of productive play, in which children are engaged in stimulating activities that allow them to discover and explore. Whether it's a group sing-along, a game of pretend, an early literacy reading exercise, or an activity like planting flowers, these kinds of programmes create a strong environment for healthy development and keep children from falling behind over the summer.

Beyond the well-crafted play opportunities, young children in summer engagement programmes benefit developmentally from the chance to increase the number of interactions they have with supportive adults. Parents are an important part of a child's life, but kids learn and develop in response to other caring adults, too. In fact, we know from the science of early childhood development that how responsive adults are to children's attempts to communicate and interact with them influences children's brain development. When babies and toddlers babble or make faces, they are seeking the stimuli they need to build skills and brain function—imagine serving a ball in a game of tennis. The player hits the ball over the net, expecting the other person to return it. Children need this same kind of serve-and-return action with adults to build strong brains. Expanding their opportunities for it through summer programming is a smart investment in their future outcomes.

Summer may be about taking a break from the routine of the rest of the year, but it's also a time when we try new things, adventure beyond what we know, in order to come back to routine in the fall with fresh eyes. That's no less true for children, who need new experiences and mental stimulation in every season of their development in order to succeed in school and in life. We can take a break from routine, but let's not take a break from our obligation to all UK children to make sure their summer holidays are a stepping-stone, not an obstacle, to their future well-being.