



Education

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Julia Steiny: Start now to stem summer's rising tide of learning loss

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Ah Independence Day! When fireworks, patriotic speeches, and band concerts celebrate the 13 colonies that declared independence from the British Empire.

But the independence that delights most of today's 63 million school-age children is their liberation from school. And more unfortunately, their liberation from learning.

July 4th officially begins the huge "summer learning loss" that will be up to the educators to remediate, and fast, before their students take the all-important state tests in the fall.

I once offered suggestions to the girls I used to mentor about what they might like to read over the summer, to keep up their skills. "No, no, Miss," they exclaimed, "we don't do school over the summer because summer is for fun. Reading is totally school."

Not a good sign.

But it has come to pass that learning is largely associated with schooling, and not happily. Our brains are designed to get pleasure, actual fun, from learning. It feels great to be good at something, or just to be right. The world teems with intriguing problems to solve for any brain with an appetite.

One of my sons once asked a friend, "So what do you LIKE to learn?" The boy answered, "Oh, I hate school." My son scoffed, "Of course. Everyone hates school. That's not what I mean. What do you WANT to learn — to play the guitar, fix cars, sports statistics? There must be something." The boy blinked hard, thinking. The question just didn't compute. To him learning was school, and school was a drag.

Years earlier, that same son of mine threatened to drop out of the high school he was hating. A fancy private

school helped us rescue him, thank God. The first thing they did was interview him about what he wanted to learn. He and an adult adviser agreed on three skills they would teach him. In effect, it was a deal: We, the school, will give you the pleasure of learning things you want to know, in exchange for learning what we need to teach you — so you'll get into a college that reflects glory on us. It worked. They flattered his narcissism, harnessed it, and motivated him to perform.

All kids, certainly not only the privileged ones, need to become independent learners, with such strong appetites for information, skills and mastery that it lasts a lifetime. They badly need the confidence, values and pleasure of knowing how to learn on their own.

Lately a copy of "Deschooling Society," by the great old radical Ivan Illich, has been lying conspicuously around my house. Illich and my husband, also an old lefty, have little faith in human institutions, and find them "disabling," as Illich puts it.

I have far more faith than they do, but I agree that institutions have an evil tendency to become more important than their missions and their clients. Health-care systems can compromise health. Schools can become antithetical to learning.

Illich says, "The pupil is 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence. ..." This is sad, but too often true. He further notes that schools "discourage both the motivation and the financing for large-scale planning for nonschooled learning."

Again, this is right.

Why don't schools teach kids about themselves and their immediate environments? What could be more interesting? Harness kids' narcissism by helping them figure out where and who they are, investigate what their community wants, audit the school's energy use, promote recycling, learn to do minor repairs. These skills need academic support, and kids could use them tomorrow at home. Treat the immediate world as a learning lab, so kids get a big hit of the pleasure of mastery.

Over the summer when school takes a break, towns, businesses and public agencies could take over nonschooled learning, by organizing learning experiences, much as elementary teachers set up different activity centers in their classrooms to attract kids to what they'd like to learn. The wastewater treatment plant, historic preservation society, or a bank might open up once a week to guide kids through a series of tasks that would teach or expose them to the skills involved in that line of work. After digesting an age-appropriate article, kids would take a learning walk of the facility, or a historic neighborhood, solve a set of chemistry or accounting problems. (Slater Mill and the zoo do this now, year-round.) In community workplaces, kids would see on-the-job use of math, science, or communications skills at City Hall, food services, animal shelters, an accounting firm, a hotel. Working with the community, schools could assign kids to attend community-learning experiences, along with their summer reading.

At least it would give parents a strong excuse to detach kids from their mind-rotting electronics.

And schools would not be the only ones responsible for or associated with teaching and learning.

Learning would be a community activity, as it should be.

Adult independence is the goal of teaching kids. People are trapped in dependency if they cannot learn on their

own. Loving learning in the first place will staunch the summer learning loss.

By the way, kidinfo.com is an excellent resource for stuff for kids and families to do. Not all of it is particularly educational, but it's all a whole lot better than TV.

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