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Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth

The summer months present an opportunity to provide services and programming that children and youth might not have access to during the school year, such as summer camps or other learning and recreational activities. But summertime also means a major departure from the structure, resources, and support systems that are available to families during the traditional school year.

A committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examined evidence on the outcomes of summertime experiences for children and youth in four domains of well-being—(1) academic learning, (2) social and emotional development, (3) physical and mental health, and (4) safety. The committee looked at the effectiveness of summertime programs while also focusing on issues of equity in terms of the availability of and access to summertime programs and services.

Summer provides a unique window of opportunity to engage families and leverage the strengths of those families, the communities in which they live, and other stakeholders to improve the well-being of children and youth. Better collaboration and coordination among these parties are needed to identify and prioritize high-quality summertime experiences, with special attention to the needs of children and youth who currently lack these opportunities.

SUMMERTIME POSES CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Often, access to developmentally supportive and enriching summer experiences is dependent on parents' financial standing. For low-income families, the opportunities for experiences that promote positive development and continued learning for their children are limited. When schools close for the summer, children, youth, and families may lose a number of vital supports, such as access to healthy meals, access to medical care, daily supervision, and structured enrichment opportunities.



As a result, summertime can increase inequity if children from wealthier backgrounds in better-served communities participate in enriching experiences while their peers from less financially secure families and underserved communities do not. During the summer, low-income children and youth have lesser gains—and in some cases losses—in reading aptitude, greater exposure to violence and crime, and further weight gain for those with obesity.

Yet summertime also offers a time for families and public and private stakeholders to close gaps in developmental outcomes and to ensure that all youth have access to experiences and settings that support their needs.

After examining all the relevant data and other information, the committee arrived at seven overarching conclusions, which serve as the basis for the recommendations and are listed below.

1. Summertime experiences can affect academic, health, social and emotional, and safety outcomes for children and youth, with those in disadvantaged communities at risk for worse outcomes.
2. There are opportunities for systems and agents to implement innovative new programs and extend effective practices that already exist during the school year into the summer period.
3. The assets and priorities of communities must be central to the planning, development, design, and evaluation of summertime programs and services.
4. All children have basic developmental needs, including the need for adequate nutrition and the need for safety, that must be met as a critical precondition for summer programs and services.
5. Children and youth who live in less advantageous circumstances (e.g., with poverty or food insecurity or in neighborhoods with high incidence of violence, crime, or over-policing) face numerous obstacles in having their needs met across the four developmental domains and in accessing positive summer experiences; these subpopulations require a special focus in the committee's recommendations.
6. Although there is a robust research literature documenting the impact of summer on academic developmental trajectories, research on the impact of summer on other developmental domains examined by the committee is scarce, leaving many questions about best practices unanswered. This is a priority research need.
7. Existing data systems do not adequately capture seasonal differences in outcomes in the four domains examined by the committee, making it difficult to fully understand the summertime experiences of children and youth.

THE NEED FOR BOTH STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED ACTIVITIES

Children's participation in structured activities has been linked to cognitive and emotional development, as well as positive functioning in the areas of academic performance, psychological health, and behavior. While structured activities are important for youth outcomes, research suggests that youth need a balance of structured and unstructured activities for optimal development. For example, one study found that participation in structured activities was associated with prosocial behavior, but also that a lack of participation in unstructured activities was associated with antisocial behavior.

Play, which is often unstructured, is critical to children's development and can promote decision making, social skills, and creativity. Play promotes cognitive, social emotional, and physical development, and when play is engaged in with parents or other adults.

Out-of-school and summer programs can offer an opportunity for both structured and unstructured play, as well as a child's choice in activities. This may be particularly important as schools increasingly focus on structured academic learning, even in the early grades, and as other societal changes (e.g., increased parental employment, greater digital engagement, safety concerns) decrease opportunities for unstructured play.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report offers a range of recommendations aimed at improving planning, administration, and coordination of summertime programs and services for children and youth; improving availability, access, and equity of summertime programs; and advancing data collection and research.

IMPROVING PLANNING, ADMINISTRATION, AND COORDINATION

RECOMMENDATION 1: Local governments (e.g., county, city) should establish a quality management system (QMS) to identify and provide positive developmental summertime experiences for children and youth, experiences that advance academic learning, improve health and well-being, and promote safety and social and emotional development. The QMS process should be specific to summertime and continuous, and it should contain the following six components:

1. A systematic assessment of existing summertime programs and services
2. A systematic community needs assessment that is inclusive of parents and youth to assess summertime programming and services
3. The identification and prioritization of gaps between current and needed programs and services
4. The development and implementation of plans to address prioritized needs from the summertime community needs assessment
5. The development and measurement of key process indicators and relevant outcomes
6. A continuous quality improvement process

RECOMMENDATION 2: Foundations and other philanthropic organizations should augment their funding, technology, and in-kind supports to intermediaries that are creating systems, platforms, and communication vehicles for—and promoting promising and effective practices focused on—summertime experiences for children and youth.

IMPROVING AVAILABILITY, ACCESS, AND EQUITY

RECOMMENDATION 3: Governors and mayors should convene local public and private employers to leverage and support employer policies, practices, and programs to expand the capacity of and access to quality summertime experiences for children and youth, particularly those in underserved communities.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Federal and state government agencies should review existing policies and regulations for programs and services for children and youth to enable the continuation during the summer months of school-year funding and resources for effective physical activity, nutrition, obesity prevention, and enrichment programs, particularly those that serve children and youth in poor and underserved communities.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The U.S. Department of Agriculture should work with state and local governments to reduce food insecurity for children and youth during the summer through existing mechanisms by increasing access to the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), reducing barriers to community eligibility for the SFSP, and expanding the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children Program.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Federal, state, and city officials, in partnership with the private sector, should increase funding for structured summer employment programs in order to serve more adolescents.

RECOMMENDATION 7: Those government agencies (federal, state, and local), nongovernmental organizations (e.g., foundations), and parts of the business community that fund, deliver, or otherwise support summertime experiences for children and youth should target summer programs that

1. focus on underserved children and youth;
2. target the specific needs of participants;
3. meet the health and safety requirements of participants in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways;
4. identify specific outcomes and measurements;
5. have concrete plans to promote strong attendance; and
6. are accessible to participants and of sufficient duration to meet desired programming outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 8: Government agencies (federal, state, and local) that play an active role in the supervision, detention, or custodial care of children and youth should provide comprehensive developmental (academic, social, emotional), health, and safety programs during the summer period. This programming should consider and respond appropriately to the risks to healthy development, health, and safety that affect children and youth in these circumstances and that disproportionately affect poor, immigrant, homeless, and racial and ethnic minority populations in this group.

ADVANCING DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

RECOMMENDATION 9: Government agencies (federal, state, and local) and nongovernmental organizations (e.g., foundations) that sponsor surveys and collect data on children and youth that includes the summer months should

- establish and maintain databases that allow for disaggregation of data by month;
- extend academic-year data collection to include the summer months when appropriate to the subject of the data collection; and
- share data across systems when possible.

COMMITTEE ON SUMMERTIME EXPERIENCES AND CHILD AND ADOLESCENT EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND SAFETY

MARTÍN-JOSÉ SEPÚLVEDA (*Chair*), Research Division, IBM Corporation (retired); **KARL ALEXANDER**, Thurgood Marshall Alliance; **NISHA BOTCHWEY**, Georgia Institute of Technology; **NANCY L. DEUTSCH**, University of Virginia; **JOSHUA DOHAN**, Youth Advocacy Division, State of Massachusetts; **BARRY A. GARST**, Clemson University; **SANDRA HASSINK**, American Academy of Pediatrics Institute for Healthy Childhood Weight; **PAMELA HYMEL**, Walt Disney Parks and Resorts; **JENNIFER MCCOMBS**, RAND Corporation; **BARBARA MEDINA**, Center for Urban Education, University of Northern Colorado; **DEBORAH MORONEY**, American Institutes for Research; **CHRIS SMITH**, Boston After School & Beyond; **RACHEL THORNTON**, Johns Hopkins University; **REBEKAH HUTTON**, *Study Director*; **PRIYANKA NALAMADA**, *Associate Program Officer*; **STACEY SMIT**, *Senior Program Assistant*.

For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on the Consensus Study Report, *Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth* (2019). The study was sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Wallace Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nas.edu/Summertimeopportunities>.

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