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Ginnie Graham: Summer a vital break for students, but parents should help keep kids' brains busy

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Posted: Tuesday, May 17, 2016 12:00 am



Levi Ruff (left) and Alexa Wheeler leave class on the last day of school in 2015 at Broken Arrow High School. MATT BARNARD/Tulsa World file

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As the kids shrug their well-worn backpacks off their shoulders Tuesday — likely in the middle of the hallway — it will be to welcome summer.

Gone is that weight of final projects and tests as students — and teachers — limp toward the last-day-of-school finish line. Let the sunshine come in and free our minds.

No, our family has no plans. No big vacations. No major projects.

Just a July 4 reunion in Arkansas and at least one canoe trip on a river in Missouri. There is only one organized camp scheduled — so far, anyway.

Summers don't need a lot of fuss, but a break is needed. It'll be 13 weeks of living on our whims and wishes, only within a budget.

When do the children play?: Kids don't get much downtime in school. Elementary schools might eke out 15 minutes — or 20 minutes if lucky — for recess. The older grades get about the same for lunch.

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Even grown-up, professional workplaces allow for 30 minutes to an hour for a break.

It's not the fault of schools. The state mandates a certain number of minutes be dedicated to each subject, so planning daily schedules turns into algebra equations. The push for more academic rigor since No Child Left Behind added additional required minutes, subtracting from the recess column.

The lack of recess has become such an issue that a group has popped up to advocate for reinstating more breaks: [American Association for the Child's Right to Play](#). That's where our education system has gone. We have to argue to give children a chance for unstructured play time.

Summer gives that breathing room. Creativity can flow in those endless LEGO purchases, art supplies and science kits. Shooting baskets, skateboarding and swimming provide much-needed physical activity.

Kids can be social again. All that "no talking," "raise your hand," "sit still" stuff is put on hold. They can hang out with friends without the worry about getting the diorama done or finishing the novel for a literature paper.

Keep the brain busy: Much is written about summer-learning loss. With topics such as lower standardized test scores at the end of the summer and teacher surveys about time needed for re-teaching in the fall, this is a real phenomenon.

The learning gained during the school year can backslide if the brain muscle isn't flexed.

It shouldn't kill summer break, however. It just means tweaking it a bit — like sneaking vegetables to a kid by putting pureed cauliflower into mashed potatoes.

Libraries are a good place to start, with all branches offering [summer reading programs](#). Make it a routine stop by putting it on the family calendar, even if the visit is for a few minutes.

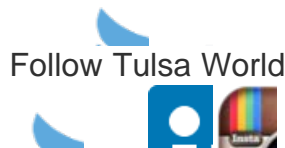
Think of the things you want to do with kids — board-game nights, museums on free days, camping in the backyard, exploring Tulsa's underground downtown, outdoor music shows or updating their bedrooms. All of these engage a kid's mind and attention. It's fun, too.

Summer break doesn't need to disappear out of fear of low test scores. Students need a break, and so do their parents and teachers.

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