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MAKE a PLAN

Insight for special needs families
to gear up for a fulfilling summer.

by Dr. Scott Barkin

Summer options abound for all families. Fundamentally, the key to enjoying the summer rests in the planning. Consider what your needs and goals are, know your options— from camps and educational programs to vacations— have a budget and identify resources for information.

In planning for the summer, first consider the desired goals or priorities for the months ahead. Among the potential goals of a summer break are enjoying family togetherness and amusement, socializing, providing a respite for a primary caregiver, embracing adventure, fostering independence, granting rest and relaxation, offering a cultural experience or change in climate or locale, and maintaining skills acquired during the school year— whether clinical or academic. Constraints also need to be considered. Potential limitations include money, distance, accommodations and accessibility, transportation, availability of information and fear or anxiety. Here's some guidance in navigating a few of the most popular summer options to ensure you meet your family's needs and address any limitations that might arise.

Summer Camps

There are a significant amount of summer programs for children with special needs. And the number seems to grow each camp season. The opportunities include day and sleepaway camps, local and international camps, short-term camps that span a few days and longer term camps that run six weeks or more.

Decide if you and your child are interested in an integrated opportunity or a camp that defines itself as serving a specific special needs population. Camps for children with special needs generally offer a traditional camp experience along with clinical therapy, academics or programs to enhance daily living skills. Sometimes such camps address all of these areas. Participation in a fully funded day camp with a focus on recreation and socialization grants a respite to the family of a child with a disability that may not otherwise be able to accommodate the child's school vacation with such comprehensive attention.

Summer School

Another option is summer school or a summer education program. In many states, including New York and New Jersey, children who receive support services through the public school system are often welcome to attend a summer school program. The programs are intended to preserve and advance skills acquired during the school year. Programs have the added value of being familiar to your child if your son or daughter has been attending the school or has previously attended the affiliated program.

Family Vacations

When considering a family vacation, examine the environments your trip includes, such as car rides, commercial travel like a train or airplane, a resort or hotel, restaurants, and urban and rural destinations. Then consider the following elements: accessibility and necessary accommodations, crowds, delays, lines, intrinsic stimuli associated with environments— sights, sounds, smells— and available medical attention. Evaluate all of your travel options, including mode of transportation, size of travel hub (regional airport versus national) and peak times of travel.

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Though plane travel may seem to be the fastest mode of transportation, you may need to deal with delays during the departure or arrival, a relatively confined area and a limited availability of emergency care. Road travel may offer greater flexibility, should plans need to be modified.

Knowing what accommodations are essential to your travel plans should contribute to a successful trip. Make phone calls to confirm that all the appropriate accommodations are available for you on the schedule you are following. Many popular family resort destinations have wonderful accommodations for families with special needs. However, the availability can be limited. If temperature or weather is an issue, look for destinations with stable conditions that are not at the extremes. Determine where quieter areas can be found early on. If your child has limited food preferences, cater to them. Pre-determine a supervision schedule and share the responsibilities if you can.

If you don't have a spouse who can pitch in, is there a friend, therapist or respite worker who might be able to accompany you? Think about the crucial objects, routines and possibly clothes that make a difference to your child, and do your best to incorporate them. Consider what strategies can be employed if long waits arise, like having DVD players, MP3 players, favorite toys and snacks on hand. Compile a "to-go packet" of information so that if a last-minute opportunity becomes available, you are prepared with a list of questions and items to pack for the journey. Identify the location, contact information and directions for seeking emergency care. Take along a first aid kit, a camera to document the trip and a journal to note successes.

Include your child in the planning process in any way possible. What are your child's wishes and fears? Also consider whether the trip is for just one child's benefit or the entire family. Compromising and remaining flexible are the next essentials following planning. Be creative and utilize your

knowledge and experience. Upon initial presentation, a trip to the museum may not appeal to everyone in the family. But, the content of the museum may appeal to one member, a visit to the gift shop might appeal to another, a change in environment might appeal to another person, a different mode of transportation or just time alone might appeal to another family member.

Resources

With all of this in mind, it can be a challenge to make a decision about what to do this summer. A variety of resources should be contemplated, including experience, which is always an important factor. See if any of the professionals, such as teachers, physicians, therapists and daycare providers familiar with your family, have suggestions.

There are also terrific online resources for identifying camps with special needs programs. For guidance, log onto www.mysummerncamps.com, www.veryspecialcamps.com, www.kidscamps.com, www.campresource.com and www.parentguidenews.com.

Some travel-related resources for families with members who have special needs include www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/specialneeds/, www.globalaccessnews.com, www.nichey.org and www.icdri.org.

Dr. Scott Barkin is the executive director of Block Institute, which offers a summer program for qualifying children ages 3 to 8 years that is funded by the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. Located in Brooklyn, Block Institute provides educational services to children with special needs. The staff consists of New York State-certified special education and early childhood teachers; occupational, physical and speech therapists; social workers; psychologists; a therapeutic feeding specialist; a consulting dietician and medical professionals.