

PARENT GUIDE NEWS

Manhattan's One & Only

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Enjoying the summer with special needs children.

by Dr. Scott Barkin and Gina Maranga

Summer presents an opportunity to finally kick back, relax and recharge. For many people, the secret to having a restful summer is all in the planning. This is especially true for families with children who have special needs.

Planning how you and your special needs child will spend the summer vacation before it arrives reduces stress, limits boredom and, in some cases, minimizes the chance of a regression of skills learned in school. Most importantly, planning helps set the stage for a summer to remember—complete with tons of enjoyable activities to fill the pages of a “What

I Did on My Summer Vacation” essay during the fall.

All children, whether they have a disability or not, do well when they know what to expect of their day. School and daycare programs lend structure to the school year. Providing a routine, albeit in a more relaxed way during the summertime, can make a world of difference in how enjoyable, fulfilling and restful the summer vacation may be.

The framework of this structure centers on maintaining regular eating and sleeping routines. Summer days can often seem endless.

But spacing the day with planned breaks to eat and rest helps avoid late afternoon cranky periods. A well-fed, well-rested child is primed to face whatever the day ahead holds.

Limiting the number of activities that you involve your child in during the course of a day also keeps the child happy and relaxed during the summer vacation. Balance the schedule with days out and days at home. For your days out, get set to explore your neighborhood with short trips to the local library, stores, parks and playgrounds. Pack a lunch with plenty of healthy snacks and drinks. Spend a day at the beach or visit a museum. On days enjoyed at home, schedule short playdates, organize toy or clothing swaps, and include your child in your daily routines, such as cooking meals, doing household chores, gardening and tackling home projects.

Plan time with your child to organize drawers or

closets, compile family photo albums or scrapbooks, and review the prior year’s schoolwork. Be sure to build in downtime for quiet activities, including reading, watching television and playing video games, especially when the weather does not cooperate.

If planning a vacation away from home, consider what your child needs to adjust to new surroundings. If you are traveling far, gradually adjusting your child’s nap time in advance to accommodate a time change can be helpful, as is packing familiar snacks, books, toys and stuffed animals. This facilitates an adjustment and creates the sense of a “home away from home” for your child. If you are visiting with friends or family members, familiarize your child with the particular loved ones through photographs, e-mails or telephone calls in advance of the visit. Vacations away from home also provide good opportunities to introduce your child to new people, places, activities and foods. Exposing your child to water activities, such as swimming, fishing and even rock skipping, are additional ways to fill your days and create memories that can be revisited throughout the year.

Most importantly, commit to spending quality time with your child, doing whatever it is that you both delight in doing most. Using the summertime to recharge, relax and reconnect with your child is certainly a recipe for a successful season.

Dr. Scott Barkin is the executive director at Block Institute and Gina Maranga is the director of program operations. Located in Brooklyn, the facility provides educational services to children (primarily 3-5 years old) with special needs, such as cerebral palsy, autism, ADHD, PDD, global developmental delays, cognitive delays and traumatic brain injury, and those who are medically fragile and/or medically involved. The staff consists of New York State-certified special education/early childhood teachers, social workers, psychologists, a therapeutic feeding specialist, a consulting dietician, medical staff and occupational, physical and speech therapists.

