



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 76

Summer Vacation Is Almost Here – Do You Know Where Your Teen Will Be?

Picture this: your teenager sitting on the couch, devouring bags of chips and gallons of soda, eyes glazed from hours of playing video games, day after day for months on end. What could this nightmare be? Summer vacation – if you don't make plans now.

For adolescents, summer is the highlight of the year – no responsibilities, sleeping in until noon, a kitchen full of food, and the sweet smell of independence. Many parents work full-time throughout the summer; some go on vacation and leave teenagers with an easygoing relative or friend; and some older teens are even left alone when parents are away. All of the structure and scheduling that occurs during the school year turns into unadulterated freedom in the summer.

For parents, the start of summer means the countdown to September is on. As yet another school year comes to a close, parents are making last-minute plans to keep their teens occupied for three long months. Sure, a few weeks may be spent on a family vacation, some teens may attend summer school, and others may take up a new hobby. But that still leaves hours each day and days each week when teens are home with nothing to do. How many days can you invent amusing activities and outings that will keep your teen out of trouble?

With less structure and adult supervision, the summer is ripe with opportunities for teens to fall into a bad crowd, experiment with drugs or alcohol, or get into other forms of mischief. If your teen has been struggling during the school year, more trouble may be awaiting you in summer. There's a reason for the saying, "Idle hands are the devil's tools." Teens are looking for adventure, risk, and excitement, especially in the summer. Being bored at home is the exact opposite of what they need. They will find a way to take risks and live adventurously with or without your support and guidance.

According to a poll by nonprofit organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California, children who are not supervised are more likely to commit crimes, be victims of crimes, do drugs, or hang out with gang members. The organization also reports that youths

start committing crimes around noon during the summer, compared to 3 p.m. during the school year. In addition, teens tend to commit drug crimes later in the evening during the summer, most likely because they can stay out later without worrying about getting up early for school. This means teens need constructive activities to occupy a broader range of time in summer than during the school year. For working parents, it's difficult to be around from noon until late in the evening every day.

A report from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy suggests that more American teens try marijuana for the first time in summer than at any other time of year. This translates into 6,300 new users each day, a 40 percent increase in first-time youth marijuana use during June and July as compared to the rest of the year. A hike in new underage drinkers and cigarette smokers also occurs during the summer months.

By taking proper precautions and planning ahead, parents can make summer vacation a positive and memorable growth experience for teens. Where should parents begin? Two words: Summer camp. Yes, there is cost involved, but for most struggling teens, the benefits are well worth the price.

Most teens want nothing more than a summer to hang out with their friends. However, for teens that are acting out, falling behind in school, disrespecting authority figures, or getting in trouble with the law, a break from negative peer influences may be exactly what they need. Sometimes the best thing for the whole family is to take a break, with a struggling teen attending camp to learn new skills and ways of approaching family conflict, and family members doing their own work at home.

There is no better way to make constructive use of free time than learning something new – a new skill, exploring an unfamiliar place, meeting new people. Therapeutic wilderness programs offer a unique opportunity for troubled teens to explore the wilderness on foot, learn primitive life skills, and participate in challenging group activities. When stripped of the comforts of home, like television, computers, and video games, teens connect with themselves and others on a deeper level.

Wilderness camps emphasize responsibility, self-awareness, teamwork, and communication, and challenge teens to achieve their personal best. Teens are introduced to a new group of peers and learn to relate to people of all backgrounds. They live in a structured, highly supervised environment, which helps teens gain perspective on life at home and build self-confidence and hope for a brighter future.

If summer camps and wilderness programs aren't right for your teen, consider getting him or her involved in volunteer work. Animal shelters, halfway houses, nursing homes, churches, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and other organizations can keep teens occupied while developing a sense of purpose, self-confidence, and personal responsibility. In addition to teaching teens the joy of giving back, volunteer work looks great on college applications and resumes.

Another activity to keep teens busy this summer is a part-time job. Many parents find internships or small tasks for their children to do at their place of employment, or you can help your teen apply to local grocery stores, restaurants, retail stores, local car washes, or pet care facilities. Teens can also earn extra money babysitting, doing yard work, house-sitting, and other odd jobs. Part-time work helps teens budget, make friends, comply with authority, develop a strong work ethic, and learn the value of a dollar.

Of course, keeping your child busy for the sake of being busy, in and out of day camps, sports, and miscellaneous activities that don't really have an impact on their lives, can be as disastrous as doing nothing. Your teen may rebel against the cluttered schedule and seek out more interesting people and places on his own. Your money would be put to better use in a summer camp with a clear, focused goal, such as a wilderness camp or weight-loss camp.

Parents who are seeing early signs of behavioral or emotional problems in their children have an excellent opportunity to get their kids back on track during summer vacation. Waiting to address these issues until the summer has started or problems become serious would do a disservice to your teen. Start talking with your teen at least a month before the start of summer vacation to make plans, reserve a place at camp, and coordinate schedules.

Don't just get by this summer, counting down the days until September. Wasted time is a wasted opportunity. A bold and exciting summer vacation can be a life-changing time of continued learning and personal exploration for teens.

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