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inside & out

Dial down kids' summer activity

By **Barbara Mahany**
Chicago Tribune

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Children need time to relax and be creative. "Boredom is merely the precursor to creativity," says Kim John Payne, who has written a book on "Simplicity Parenting." (istockphoto.com)

So, you're checking your watch, keeping your eyeballs glued to the calendar. You are counting down the days, the hours, the minutes to summertime, aren't you? You think, "Aha! At last, the season of kick-back days and don't-hurry-to-bed nights."

You've got plans for a lemonade stand. Maybe even squeeze it from lemons. Heck, you'll show the kiddies how to build a fort in the trees and sit out under the stars.

Hulloooo? What year did you think this was? Your dreams are so long ago.

This is 2010. Kids need to be fed, packed, shooshed onto the camp bus just after daybreak. And don't forget about the dueling sports dates, with soccer starting on one field at 5, while baseball gets underway, 3 miles away, 30 minutes later.

What happened to summer? we cry into our store-bought lemonade.

Unwilling to give up our hopes and dreams, we called a fellow we'd like to claim as our summertime hero.

Kim John Payne has written the book on dialed-down parenting: "Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure Kids" (Ballantine Books, \$25).

Payne lives, breathes and preaches the simplicity gospel.

"Think about your most golden summer moments," he says. "It's a time of the year when you can breathe out. Otherwise we live in a state of emotional asthma — you can breathe in, but you can't breathe out."

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"Summer's like the antidote to nervousness and anxiousness — except when it's not," he says, sipping us short. "Except when it's jam-packed."

Parenting, he says, has become "competitive sport." Summer, he argues, "is a time to demilitarize, to put down the parental arms race. It's one of the few times when we can give our children permission, a chance to rediscover the gift of boredom."

"Boredom," he goes on without notice, "is merely the precursor to creativity."

The formula, he says, is this: One-third of a child's life should be busy; one-third, creative time; and one-third, downtime.

"When you give the gift of boredom, and a child comes back complaining, 'I'm bored,' simply respond, 'Oh, that's a pity.'

"My advice to the parents is to be more boring than the boredom, (and) flat-line the response. Within 15 minutes of boredom, they'll break out into something creative. If we can just bear with it, not leap (to the so-called rescue).

"With countless numbers of kids, the creativity they find goes on for hours, whereas the activity we find for them lasts maybe half an hour."

If you want to give your child an ideal summer, all you have to do is close your eyes and imagine

it. "We all carry an imprint from our own long ago," says Payne.

He would hope that an ideal summer is one that gives a child these essentials: self-constructed activities (a box or a blanket, and, poof, you've got the start of a fort or a clubhouse); alone time, the rare chance for a kid to be alone with his or her thoughts; dreamy time, a chance to stare at the clouds or out the window and dream; connection to nature, it needn't be fancy, a walk along a river bank, a corner under a backyard bush.

Make time for family stories.

Whip up co-created meals, when everyone gets in on the act, instead of the rush-to-the-table ones of the whole, long school year.

Begin a scrapbook. Cook outdoors. Start a 2,000-piece jigsaw puzzle.

Build a makeshift shelter —

and sleep in it.

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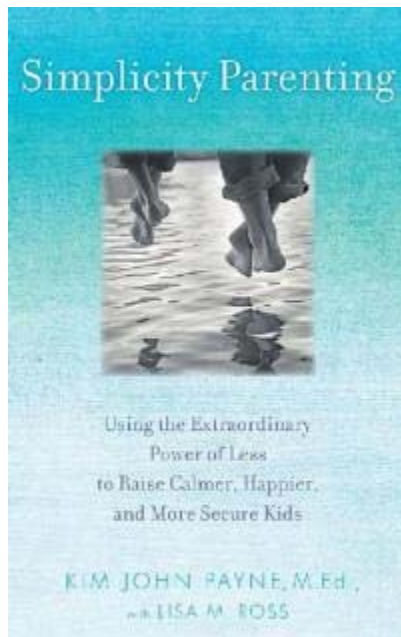
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(The Denver Post)

Take a deep breath in, then let it out slowly. So flows the beauty of summer at its simplistic best. Savor it.

Childhood only comes once. Give the children you love the treasure of taking it easy, the way summertime was meant to be.

Take it down a notch

Payne, a school counselor for 18 years and a private family counselor-therapist for 15 years, is spearheading a global Simplicity Parenting campaign (simplicityparenting.com), one he calls

"a campfire movement; it creates warmth village to village."

Not one to leave parents out on a limb, Payne scribbles this list of ideas on his pad: It's a fact of life that kids these days go off to camp, so pay attention to the camp you choose. Look for a camp with strong connections to nature, and plenty of downtime. You might try a camp with a focus on a single activity, say, canoeing.

And, says Payne, there's a movement toward "simple camp. Waldorf schools (whywaldorfworks.org) run camps where Payne says the kids are likely to come home "soothed, not jazzed."

Rhythms and rituals are deeply important to young children, even in summer. Aim for family dinner. Relax the rhythms, but don't let them go, Payne advises.

Carry on with stories at bedtime. And bath time at the end of a hot busy day. All help a child absorb what's happened that long summer day.


Kids need to decompress, says Payne. In the evenings, pull out the board games. Turn off the TV. Try for an unplugged summer. Or maybe just a week.

OK, or maybe just one screen-free weekend.

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