



Summer “School” Reading Assignments

Hallmark to Success

Developing a love of reading, yet wrangled by the demand to complete a summer reading assignment, is further underscored by unique and often illuminated set of learning challenges. Girls with Turner Syndrome, many of whom are avid readers, may succumb to pressures of summer reading assignments when faced with writing an essay or presenting a book report upon returning to school.

It is well documented that reading just five books over the summer prevents learning loss. This statement is backed up by research by Harvard professor Jimmy Kim. "Similar to prior research on summer learning... I found that the volume of summer book reading was positively related to fall reading achievement independent of prior reading and writing skills and student background characteristics.... The benefits of reading books during summer vacation were also consistent for all ethnic groups. In particular, reading four to five books had significantly larger effects than reading three or fewer books." ¹

In her landmark study of public library summer reading programs, Barbara Heyns found that children who read at least six books during the summer maintain or improve their reading skills, while children who didn't read *any* books saw their reading skills decline by as much as one grade level. Yet, every year, parents and children experience major stress to complete summer reading assignments. ²

Why does this happen? There are a number of reasons, but most go beyond summer “laziness”. Being a teacher with over 25 years’ experience, I cringe when I hear a multitude of excuses for incomplete reading assignments and recognize there are likely underlying issues related to planning and organizing time, along with difficulty to comprehend what is read.

Executive Function

Why does a child struggle to plan, organize and execute work expectations when other students of the same age are on task? Students with identified learning differences often have not yet developed strong strategies and supports because their brain pathways are still developing. The first challenge a student may face when brain pathways are still “under construction” is struggling to handle work expectations independently. The frontal lobe of a human brain is where executive functions are located. **Students with underdeveloped frontal lobes do not possess the automatic skills needed to complete a complex task, like reading an entire book, independently.**

Executive functions include time management, working memory, processing, to name just a few critical skills; and these skills are required for fluent reading, which is necessary for reading comprehension. Therefore, reading requires a student actively engage the frontal lobe; but this is counter to expectations – completing the summer book assignment without moderate to maximum support from you or another adult. So, when your child considers the monstrous responsibility to “read” a book, she is poised to negatively react based on past experiences and fear.

Literal Thinking and Reading Comprehension

The next consideration for parents is your child understanding and interpreting a book. For many students, literally it means “to read the book.” That’s right, only read. This is where the real challenges begin to “break out” at home. Students with non-verbal learning disabilities – which by the way, indicates a student is literal and concrete as a thinker, do not “get” the abstract concepts and implied connections, like many of their age-level peers.

Avoiding Meltdown Mode

With a literal person, verbalizing that she did not read a book is like saying they did not do the work. In her black/white concrete world, this is untrue. Now the scene has been set for what I call, “*Meltdown Mode.*” When *Meltdown Mode* occurs, there is sure to be trouble! Before you enter the world of Meltdown Mode, be more aware of the fact that your child may have “read” the book, but has no clue what the book’s plot, internal and external conflicts, to name a few story elements is about. Why? Your child likely did not understand significant portions of the book. While your child can easily decode the words in the book, it does not mean she understands the plot. If you can absorb these points and make modest modifications and strategies, then your home may experience less yelling, screaming and/or crying. Honestly, just writing about *Meltdown Mode* makes my stomach tighten up!

Parental Guidance

Students with various learning differences typically do not possess the ability to keep to a schedule, since frontal lobes are still developing. If your child has learning differences, then it is important to support their time management skills. Guiding versus telling, are two different approaches but only one will work. Telling and demanding, generally evokes conflict and resistance. Guiding takes a greater deal of time, practice and patience and will nurture better educational outcomes as well as a deeper connection and love of reading. It is necessary for you and your child to read together throughout the process, modeling and applying new found skills. The summer respite is a time to inspire a lifelong pleasure of reading and prepare your child with the fundamental building blocks in learning; this is not the time for your child to independently read.

So what can you do? Read the information below for suggestions.

- **Set up a calendar visible for everyone at home**
 - Set a daily time on the calendar to read. It is okay to take a day off from reading.
 - Divide the number of pages by the number of days the assignment is due.
 - Determine the number of pages your child can handle reading at one sitting. This will help reduce stress for you and your child.
- **Use specific reading strategies consistently to help your child develop skills to automaticity.** Strategies to support may include:
 - **Highlighting for easier recall**
 - Highlighting important points using a yellow highlighter
 - Use a red highlighter if a word(s) or paragraph is confusing or unknown. After discussing the confusion or point, then, highlight in yellow.
 - Take notes in the side margins of the book’s pages.
 - Do not be afraid to write in a book, that is what college students do. Your child may have a problem with this because it “goes against the school rules.”
 - Print the “*Companion Guide*” blank template as a tool to help complete this exercise. The “*Companion Guide*” will help your child to summarize each chapter; write vocabulary words and other worthwhile activities, using this guide. All the work is organized and can be used as an instrumental resource to achieve a successful summer reading assignment.

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¹ Kim, Jimmy (2004) 'Summer Reading and the Ethnic Achievement Gap', Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 9: 2, 169-188

² Barbara Heyns, Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1978).