

CAMP

Enrichment

Does learning have
a place in children's
summer fun?

BY JANE PORTER

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Madison Maxwell, 7, sits on a classroom floor in a circle of children, silver, red and blue streamers hanging from her ponytail. Decked out in patriotic colors for Bastille Day, Madison is one of 13 campers celebrating the French equivalent of Independence Day at La Petite Ecole at the Academy of the Holy Names in Albany.

These campers are not playing softball or splashing around in the pool like kids at traditional camps. For two weeks in the middle of July these campers — some of them as young as 4 — gathered to learn French at one of many educational camps in the area.

More than 6 million children will attend camp in the United States this summer, according to Jeffrey Solomon, executive director of the National Camp Association. Many of them will participate in educational programs.

Nevertheless, experts have mixed opinions on whether

the classroom is the best place for children to spend their summer days.

Children lose about one month of their grade-level equivalent over the summer, according to Harris Cooper, professor of psychology and director of the Program in Education at Duke University. Experts call this phenomenon the "summer slide" or "summer amnesia."

Cooper evaluated 93 studies on the effectiveness of summer school and found that students who participated in these programs scored higher on standardized tests in the fall than those who did not.

"I think it's important for every parent to consider what their child's strengths and weaknesses are and what their interests are, and use at least part of the summer to expand their child's horizons in that way," Cooper said.

At the Summer Educational Enrichment Program at Hudson Valley Community College, children from kindergarten to seventh grade participate in a classroom-based

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curriculum for six and a half hours each day. The program covers science, math and language arts.

"The only problem we have with kids is they sometimes see the classroom and they say, 'Uh-oh, it looks like school,'" said director Chris Helwig. "But we say, 'Wait a minute, it's not like school.'"

The Hudson Valley program, though set in a classroom format, does not involve testing, and each day includes a period of physical education.

Connie Young's 7-year-old daughter Amanda is attending the enrichment program for three weeks this summer.

"I like to choose camps where she stays put, at least at this age," Young said. "I like the reading and the math. If she can get a little of that during camp, there is not so much refreshing that is needed come the school year."

On Bastille Day at La Petite Ecole, the campers shuffle along the grass in an egg balancing relay race.

"*Un oeuf*," says their teacher slowly as she holds up a hard-boiled egg.

Art of climbing

Mostly the campers at La Petite Ecole are indoors, but the children are taken outside for some fresh air occasionally, said co-director Michelle Pollard.

Some worry that classroom based programs do not offer children enough time outdoors. "We've lost the art of climbing trees," said Stacy DeBroff, author of "The Mom Book Goes to School" and founder of www.momcentral.com.

"Children need to be built up physically, mentally and emotionally to achieve academically," said Sister St. John Delany, associate professor of education at Pace University. "It all has to work together."

According to DeBroff, children only spend about six hours a week during the school year playing. "These educational camps are moving us toward a 24/7 educational plunge for our kids," she said. "The best way for kids in elementary and middle school to spend their summers is to be engaged in play."

Although students attending school-like programs score higher in the fall on standardized testing, all students make the same progress over the school year, according to a study of the Baltimore school system, said Lindy Buch, director of the office of Early Childhood Edu-

cation and Family Services at the Michigan Department of Education.

"Most kids don't need sitting behind a desk being inactive for another three months of the year," she said.

Trying a variety

Keeping children engaged and honing their sense of achievement are critical elements to a summer learning program, whatever its focus might be, according to Buch. It is important for younger children to try out a variety of activities over the summer to decide what they like, Buch said.

Madison will tell you herself that learning French was her choice. The second-grader's feet are far from reaching the ground when she sits on a bench, but she knows what she wants to learn and where she plans on going.

"I want to go to France some day, and I want learn to speak other people's languages," she says as fellow campers play in the grass behind her.

By the end of the summer, Madison will have attended four different camps: La Petite Ecole, the Guilderland town day camp, a cheerleading camp and Vacation Bible School Camp.

Although it is important for children to try out a variety of activities when they are younger, by the age of 8 to 10, Buch says children should begin specializing in a particular activity of interest. "The major emphasis on youth development gets important at middle school," she said.

Mathematical Explorations for the Competitive Student, a week-long camp in Schenectady that prepares middle schoolers for math competitions, is one such local program enabling children to specialize.

"Limiting new experiences to a week or two rather than a whole summer allows kids to see if they like it or not," said Connell Frazer, dean of the School of Education at The Sage Colleges.

It is important for parents to listen to their children's interests when dealing with such specialized programs, she said.

By her fourth day at La Petite Ecole, Madison knows the experience is the right one for her. "I want to be coming here," she says nodding her head, hopping off of her bench and joining the relay race.

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