

Published August 18th, 2010

Getting Ready for Back to School

By Lou Fancher



It's mid-August. The K-12 school year begins in a few days. Regardless of whether this makes your children cheer or groan, it's time to rev up their cognitive juices.

Sure, you can send your child to the library, or haul out last year's homework for review. And if there's a considerable need for academic preparation, Lamorinda has learning centers and private tutors in abundance. But this year, think radical and turn the bumpy end of summer into a dreamy slide back into the classroom.

To organize your approach, center on just five basic areas: math, language/history, science, art/music, and physical fitness. And don't forget creativity. Recent analysis of E. Paul Torrance's studies, developed in the late 1950's to assess creativity, have shown diminishing numbers. While American schools focus more and more on rote learning, many European schools are shifting to collaborative, problem-solving learning. What's more, as governments and businesses become increasingly global, generating innovative ideas-and accepting the ideas of others-is paramount.

The best way to learn math is in a restaurant. Not only is food a terrific incentive, there's everything from simple arithmetic to

istockphoto

advanced probability and statistics involved. Have your K-5 age child count the items on the table by category, then add them up, subtract the forks, divide by the number of chairs, and have two desserts. Ask your middle-schooler to figure out the tip, using decimals, percentages and a dose of generosity. For your high school genius, take a list of mathematical terms related to probability theory and geometry along. You'll have a great time calculating the statistical inference between fellow patrons and the geometric correlation of their physical size to the size of their orders.

For a science refresher, get lost outdoors. But have a map in your pocket so younger children can learn to orient by the sun, read a map, and help find the way home. Get your middle school student excited about physics by skipping stones at the Lafayette Reservoir, or alert to nature by tallying the number of birds he or she can spot in an hour at Tilden Park. Collect small rocks and fallen leaves for later identification.

Your older teenager needs a more sophisticated touch, so consider getting "lost" for 24 hours. Pitch a tent in the backyard and cook dinner over a fire-both activities entail mechanical reasoning (that darn tent), and chemistry (laws of combustion as applied to roasted hot dogs). Lay back and talk color theory while the setting sun tints the sky, then let astronomy end the day by calling out the constellations.

Lamorinda's gallery openings, theater offerings and two historic movie houses can easily flex your kids' late summer artistic muscles. The Hearst Gallery at Saint Mary's College has a new, stunning exhibit featuring a trio of 19th century plein air painters. Visit the gallery before an outdoor picnic. Bring a pad of paper and colored pencils to the park and watch your child's inner landscape emerge.

Both the Orinda Theatre and Moraga's New Rheem Theatre have a wide variety of movies. For the younger student, go online before heading to the theater. Help them learn how animated films are made and dream of being the next John Lasseter. With older students, conduct in-depth research: study the director, learn about the film's location, or gather biographical information about a favorite actor. Who knows, they might be so engrossed, you'll get to eat all of the popcorn.

After attending an arts event, ask your child to write a review. Putting opinions into understandable language, finding factual arguments to support one's position, and getting to the point directly are a great warm up for school papers.

A simple idea for directing your kids to literary fame is letter-writing. They'll score points with the relatives and learn a little history by writing to the grandparents. Create a list of questions on a particular topic: war, finance, transportation, technology, women's rights. By writing to a senior generation, they'll strengthen formal communication skills and gain a historical perspective at the same time. If the grandparents aren't an option, they can write to you. Help them see you as someone other than the hang-up-your-clothes nag.

With sports camps wrapping up, your child might need a trip to the hammock more than to the ballpark. Now's the perfect time to try an alternative sport, just for fun. Borrow tennis rackets, go bowling, or take a trial yoga or karate class at a local studio. Organize a pick-up game if you must, but resist the urge to turn their brief respite into an event. If your child's pre-season practice has already started, suggest they write down their goals: one involving team work and one focused on positive sportsmanship.

Finally, if you've been running around all summer and just want to stay close to home, playing board games or cooking a family meal can be done without a road trip. Allow your kids to choose the games and do the cooking. Turn-taking, following rules, making decisions, creativity, and sharing are aspects of both activities. Whatever you choose, don't try to be perfect: remember, sometimes, brilliance is found in learning from your mistakes.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA