

## Teacher's Corner

### Summertime Support Strategies



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The last school bell for the 2023-2024 academic year has finally rung. Summer is officially upon us. For some people, summer brings carefree days and relaxing nights. But for the rest of us, summer is literally UP ON us, and we are trying not to fall. We are juggling new summer schedules, new summer routines, and new summer demands while raising our children with autism and/or developmental disabilities. Not to mention summer-related transition challenges, sensory difficulties, limited resources, and delays with service providers. We are managing as best we can. But additional support is always appreciated.

In this article, I will detail summertime support strategies that I have found to be successful as the foster mother of a 12-year-old with cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair for mobility and as the foster mother of multiple children with autism across the spectrum and age ranges. In addition to fostering, I am the biological mother of a 4-month-old who also requires my love and attention. Therefore, as you can imagine, I am always searching for ways to ensure each one of us are maximizing our summertime fun. Before delving into the strategies I have utilized, I want to emphasize that each child's experience with their autism and/or developmental disabilities is unique. What works for one child, may not work for the next. So do not fret if the strategies listed below need some tweaking to best meet the needs of your child and your family's circumstances.

**Establish your Triple S: Summertime Support System!**

Or as I like to call them, your Summertime Support Superheroes. For my children, my Triple S consists of community members as well as family and friends. The community superheroes that save us the most work are summer programs in Cumberland County. My oldest with cerebral palsy attends a summer camp that not only "accommodates" his wheelchair but makes him feel like he belongs to a loving community. He goes on field trips to places he has never been before including different museums and jump parks. And he goes on picnics and hikes where the superheroes even jump in and give his wheelchair a push.

My younger autistic children attend a summer daycare that supports their social skills. The superheroes here incorporate my children's preferences into activities and have their peers give a helping hand. For example, my 6-year-old who has limited speech loves basketball and fans. When he attended and completed classroom assignments, he was able to sit next to the class fan and play basketball on a mini-indoor basketball goal. He even spoke with his peers who were able to play with him. He and his peers shared snacks and held hands when walking the hallways on a buddy system. Holding hands was a big deal, since he didn't prefer touch initially. This summer daycare helped my son tremendously!

Both the summer camp and the summer daycare programs provide inclusion for my children. But not all families have access to resources such as these. Therefore, some families may be supported by other community-based superheroes such as ABA therapists, behavior support

specialists, community support specialists, churches, rec centers, and more. The key is to find the community that truly feels like community where you and your children are welcomed and experience belonging. You may have to build it and that is perfectly fine!

Family and friends are important summertime support superheroes as well. My family and friends are available to watch the kids when needed. This provides opportunities to run errands and to engage in self-care. Sometimes self-care is just sitting in my pajamas and not doing anything at all. Or I will go out and do something like get a hot stone massage or a pedicure. I used to feel guilty about taking these moments to myself, but then I realized they were necessary. I needed to recharge to be able to provide my children with the best support possible and to be a superhero for them too!

**Create a SSSchedule.** No, that's not a typo. A SSSchedule is a Summertime Structured Schedule. This provides consistency and routine for our babies during the summer break. For my SSSchedule, I do not wake my children up as early as their school schedule and it works well for us. Their school day typically starts around 6:30am. For summer, we start around 7:30am. However, I know some families that prefer to keep their children on the same timed schedule year long and it is successful too! It all depends on what works best for you and your family.

My ssschedule is individualized for each child and implemented when they are not in their summer programs. the ssschedule includes activities they enjoy and is visual for my younger and/or autistic children. the ssschedule is more sequential than time focused. wake-up, use the bathroom, eat breakfast, academic assignments, etc. everything is listed from mealtimes, to outings, to leisure activities like tablet time. i have found that the ssschedule

*Figure 1*  
Example SSSchedule

[Child's] SSSchedule				
 Use Bathroom	 Brush Teeth	 Eat Breakfast	 Help Garden	 Do Math
 Play Games	 Eat Lunch	 Read	 Take Live Selfies	 Family Time
 Eat Dinner	 Play Games	 Brush Teeth & Use Bathroom	 Wash Up	 Go To Bed

helps my autistic children understand what to expect each day during the summer and eases transitions. moreover, including academic tasks can help prepare for the upcoming school year.

**Incorporate Sensory-Friendly Activities.** Sensory processing difficulties are common for children with autism and developmental disabilities. Each child's sensitivities are different. Some children may be sensitive to loud noises, bright lights, crowded spaces, voice tones, certain textures, and even colors. When planning your SSSchedule or summer activities, consider their unique sensory sensitivities and opt for sensory-friendly experiences. Plan for their sensitivities. Choose quieter venues. Carry noise-canceling headphones. Bring sunglasses. Visit places during their slower traffic hours. Travel with comfort items. These sensory-friendly tips may assist with anxiety and facilitate calm responses.

**Encourage Communication and Social Interactions.** Supporting the development of our children's verbal and nonverbal communication skills over the summer helps to ensure that they are heard now and once school starts. We can support them in various ways. For my nonver-

*Figure 2*  
Enjoying a day at the Brookfield Zoo



bal children, picture cards, communication boards, sign language, and assistive technology devices are helpful. We practice using these techniques daily. For my verbal children, I like storytelling, social stories, and role-playing activities during the summer. This can include the use of dress up, puppets, and toys. I play along with my children and try to show them that they are never too old to have fun while learning. Incorporating these activities into your child's SSSchedule can provide engaging opportunities for practice.

Lastly, **Soak Up Some Sun.** Embracing outdoor adven-

tures is one way to enjoy the summer sun while having summertime fun. Nature offers a sensory-rich environment and the chance for our children to explore, relax in the shade, walk a trail, bike ride, or partake in other outdoor physical activities while staying hydrated. One summer my children and I tackled gardening! We loved it! My oldest liked seeing us eat fresh garden vegetables, while my youngest liked playing in the dirt with mommy. None of us liked the birds eating our strawberries. But it was a lesson learned. Each morning after checking on the garden and watering the produce, everyone started their SSSchedules. Most times, to be honest though, all of us took naps after coming in from the sun. That was just an added bonus.

Other enjoyable outdoor activities include birdwatching,-

cloud surfing, nature scavenger hunts, going to the zoo, and a game called live selfies. No, not using the “live” button on your iPhotos. But a game where you challenge everyone to take beautiful pictures with living things (plants, ants, squirrels, cats, anything living). This game burns energy and allows for the use of cell phones or tablets. This can be a win-win!

Whether it is establishing your team of superheroes, developing a SSSchedule, or another summertime support strategy, with patience, understanding, and creativity, summer can be a season of meaningful experiences and cherished memories. Summer does not have to be “up on” us. It can be a time of growth, exploration, support, and joy for us and our children with autism and developmental disabilities.