Plumb: Parents can help children avoid summer slump

By TERRY C. PLUMB - Guest Columnist

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Teachers have known for years that children's reading skills decline during the summer break. Learning to read is like riding a bicycle, teachers say. Skills needed to read must be repeated continuously over an extended period.

Estimates of reading loss vary, but they typically range from nine to 12 weeks. That lost time must be made up during the next school year, which means valuable time is spent regaining lapsed skills.

Although the summer slump affects children at all levels, the problem is particularly vexing for struggling readers. Teachers worry about a child who isn't reading at grade level by third grade; that's when reading becomes critical to learning other subjects, including math.

Numerous studies have shown that the problem can be minimized or reversed if students both have access to books during the summer and actually read them.

What is being done to counter the summer slump? Around the country, schools have come up with creative ways to get books into children's hands. In Green Bay, Wisc., the staff of one elementary school converted a recreational vehicle into a book mobile, which they drove into neighborhoods where children were struggling with literacy. Over one summer, they reduced the normal summer setback from 12 weeks to two. In other communities, civic clubs have formed partnerships with school districts to provide books to children.

What can families do to prevent or at least offset the summer slump?

The first thing is to make sure your child has a library card, and that you encourage him or her to use it. A weekly or biweekly trip to the public library (or a bookmobile) should become part of your family's summer schedule. If you need suggestions for suitable books, ask the children's librarian.

By law, S.C. schools must provide parents with their children's scores on standardized tests, but scores can be confusing. The person who's most familiar with your child is his or her teacher. Ask the teacher to suggest titles.

Having access to books is key, but they don't help if they aren't read. Ask your children to maintain a simple reading log (title, author, date completed). Also, ask them questions about books they have read. For example:

Would you like to read more books by this author? Why?

Did any characters change during the book? What caused the change?

Would you recommend this book to a friend?

If your summer plans include a week at the beach or a visit to grandparents, be sure to include side trips to a children's museum (such as EdVenture in Columbia) or historic site (e.g., Fort Sumter in Charleston).

Remember: Summer learning should be fun for the entire family. Here are some excellent websites that will allow your child to dump the slump and have a good time doing it:

Scholastic.com/summerreading: Lots of titles for all levels.

Kids-space.org: Stories, poems, etc., written by kids for kids.

Rif.org/readingplanet: Activities, authors, contests and games for every level.

Bookreviewsbykids.com: Allows your children to post their own book reviews.

Funschool.kaboose.com: Fun math, science and language-arts activities.

Funbrain.com: Offers math and reading drill fames to keep skills honed.

Discoverykids.com: Uses games, experiments, etc. to teach about science.

Mr. Plumb, a retired newspaper editor from Rock Hill, wrote this article as part of a project for the S.C. Diversity Leaders Initiative at Furman University. Reach him at terry.plumb@gmail.com.

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