

Summertime Fun
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Summer vacation soon will arrive. Parents and children alike often see this as a time to relax. Household rules may become more lax, bedtimes later, chores not upheld, play dates increase, and thoughtful meal planning takes a back seat.

For most children, this lack of structure, although initially welcomed, becomes a burden to all concerned. For those with bipolar disorder (and other behavioral & emotional issues), the lack of structure only complicates the course of the illness, often times upsetting the stability that was present during the school year.

According to Gabriela Corá, MD, MBA, structure is an important part of the bipolar treatment plan. Combined with one's regular bipolar treatment, maintaining a consistent routine should help. Structure does not have to be viewed as a "bad" thing and can instead be introduced as a fun way to experience the summer months. Including the child in this planning will help insure its success. Setting up a schedule with your teen will have different activities, but a loose outline of expectations is reasonable.

Without structure, it's inevitable that our kids will complain that they're bored, and for some, get into trouble. Dr. Susan Bartell, a Family Psychologist, points out that younger kids with little structure are more likely to get into fights and become cranky and hard to manage, while teens' use of marijuana is much higher in the summer months than at any other time of the year. Although it's not the parents' place to fill every waking moment, you can help your kids plan a fun and healthy daily schedule.

Start with a basic calendar of the months your child will be off from school. Fill in any dates you already know; such as over night or day camps, a family vacation, or summer school classes. Add any pre-scheduled doctor's appointments. You may want to use different colored pens to help categorize these.

Discuss their new sleep & wake time and include them on your calendar.

A **healthy sleep pattern** is very important. Allowing your child or teen to go to bed a little later is fine, but remember the following:

- Go to bed and get up at ~ the same time every night, aiming for 7-9 hours of quality sleep.
- A later bedtime still requires adequate down time (no TV, computer) and no sugar, caffeine, etc.
- If you notice you are sleeping more or less than usual, tell your doctor.

You can discuss with your child what age-appropriate activities they want included in their summer schedule. Make sure you discuss the reality of finances, transportation to/from, and other family members' possible scheduling conflicts.

Volunteer work, a full or part-time job, practice (sports, musical instruments, riding, karate, etc), summer school or reading requirements, college applications, and plain old "fun" should all be considered. Help your child develop a list of rainy day activities. When they tell you they're bored, bring out the list and let them choose. Remember to allow for some spontaneous activities as well. Keeping a healthy balance of planned activities and down time will lead to a better outcome.

Just as structure and a healthy sleep pattern are important in maintaining stability, so are diet and exercise. During the school year, most kids have physical education &/or school sports incorporated into their day. It is important to schedule exercise into the week's plan. It not only reduces stress, but also can reduce weight gain often a side effect of some bipolar medications.

During the summer months, school lunches and family dinners may become replaced with daytime noshing, late night snacking, movie theatre popcorn, baseball snacks, and meals on the run. It is important to maintain a nutritious diet and one that does not cause mood changes (caffeine, sugar, alcohol).

Here is an example of a structured, yet fun, summer day:

Monday:

8:00am: Wake, dress
8:30: Nutritious breakfast
9:00: Chores; clean room, feed cat, sweep the kitchen
10:00: Free time
11:00: Swim lesson
12:30: Nutritious lunch
1:00: Have Susie over, out door play
3:30: Volunteer at dog shelter
5:30: Set the table
6:00: Nutritious dinner
7:00: Free time
8:00: Get ready for bed, summer reading
9:00: Bed

The structure of the summer will help ease your child back into the school schedule both with respect to sleep patterns and expectations. Enjoy!