

# How Chicago families can simplify their summer

Taking on summer at a slower pace allows for more family time

Megan Cottrell

Last summer was a lesson in opposites for Lisa Rekstad and her 9-year-old son, Ellis. They spent a week at farm camp out in Rockford—fresh air, fluffy clouds, open fields and farm animals. Then the last day, before the Rekstads came back to their Chicago home, they went to a water park. Screaming kids, flashing lights, blaring music.

"The experiences are night and day," says Rekstad. "One, your mind completely clears. You can hear the birds, hear the horses neighing. The other ones, you have this loud thumping music and primary colors gouging out your eyeballs."



This summer, Rekstad says her family has chosen to simplify and reconnect, applying what she learned from a workshop on Simplicity Parenting, a movement to help parents cut down on the stresses of modern life in order to raise happier kids.

Summer is the perfect time to simplify family life, says Kim John Payne, author of the book, [Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids](#).

Most families, he says, look forward to summer as a break from their frantic schedules, but they find they can't seem to slow down.

Simplicity Parenting started as an outgrowth of Payne's work as a family therapist. He saw many kids who were overwrought—feisty and defiant or sometimes sullen and withdrawn. He recommended simple changes, such as reducing the number of toys, creating daily routines and limiting screen time, and was astounded by how well children responded.

"What's happening for so many kids is that the demands of the 'too much, too soon, too sexy, too young world' is flooding our kids. It's breaching the levee. It's spilling over into their inside world," says Payne.

## Slow down

When it comes to summer, Payne says, too many parents think they have to provide constant entertainment to make their kids' vacations worthwhile. Instead, he champions the value of less-less buzz and boom-and more time for catching fireflies, telling stories and running around barefoot.

"The fever pitch of family life now has become the new normal," says Payne. "In order to break the pattern of that, we need summer."

But how can we get off the high-speed train of modern childhood and reconnect with our kids? Payne recommends starting off the summer with a family retreat. He suggests going camping, hiking or canoeing.

But how do you sustain the connectedness and slower pace you set when you get back?

Payne points to another aspect of Simplicity Parenting: Setting regular mealtimes, bedtimes and wake-up times.

Another tip? Let your kids get bored. When his own daughters whine that they're bored, Payne says he gives them a frown and says, "Oh dear." Within 20 minutes, his girls have found something to do, entertaining themselves instead of relying on a parent or a screen to keep them busy.

"You've got to be the most boring thing in the room. Outbore the boredom," says Payne.

Susan Bruck has seen this type of creativity in action. She's a teacher at Chicago's Waldorf School and a Simplicity Parenting mentor. She recalls summers with her own daughters, making fairy houses and eating warm raspberries right off the bush.

Bruck says getting out of the house can be fun too, but parents shouldn't feel pressured to rush around and see everything a place has to offer.

"Sometimes the most exciting thing at the zoo might not be the lion's den or that exhibit way over there, but the squirrel that's climbing up the tree or the

ants crawling over the sidewalk where someone dropped their ice cream on the ground," says Bruck.

## Family rituals and Learning

Bruck says the slower pace of summer is a great time to make new rituals together.

Family rituals make kids feel safe and build lasting memories, says Meg Cox, author of [The Book of New Family Traditions: How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays & Everyday](#).

Cox says summer also can be a great time for kids to choose something they want to learn how to do, like jumping rope, playing the harmonica or learning a few magic tricks. Get some books from the library and then spend summer afternoons practicing, laughing and enjoying their progress. It's not as much about accomplishing something, as it is finding something to enjoy together.

"It's seizing the moment. It's making memories by really living in the moment," says Cox. "What every human being is doing on this earth is to make meaning out of the time that they have, and rituals are a way to do that."

But what if your kids see the proverbial Joneses running themselves ragged, going from Disney to King's Island, soccer camp to acrobatics camp, Lincoln Park Zoo to Shedd Aquarium? Will they resent you and wish they were going, going, going too? Payne says the answer is, surprisingly, no.

"In three decades of working with parents, I always ask them one simple question: What is your golden moment from your childhood?" says Payne. "Inevitably it's never about doing more. It's never about racing from activity to activity. It's never about things that money buys."

"These beautiful memories are not random. It's a simple formula. It's about time together," says Payne.

Lisa Rekstad says her family life has become sweeter since they've simplified.

"It frees us up to do the things we want and be with the people we want to be with," she says.

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