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SundayReview | NEWS ANALYSIS

The Families That Can't Afford Summer

By KJ DELL'ANTONIA JUNE 4, 2016

WHAT are your kids up to this summer? Sounds like a casual question. But for working parents at this time of year, it's loaded. What have you managed to pull together that will keep your kids engaged, healthy, happy and safe, while still allowing you to keep feeding and clothing them? For most parents, summer, that beloved institution, is a financial and logistical nightmare.

Tolanda Barnette is hoping for "a miracle" for her 6-year-old son: The 41-year-old day care worker can't afford to enroll him at the center where she works, and she's just saved enough to move her family out of the shelter where they've been living for the past year into an apartment in Durham, N.C. There's no money for even the least expensive camp.

Her only option is to leave the boy at home with his 12-year-old sister. "My daughter's not going to be happy," Ms. Barnette said. "She doesn't want to spend her summer babysitting." Her daughter is also scheduled to stay with her father for part of the summer, an opportunity Ms. Barnette's 6-year-old doesn't have. "I'm really digging for something for him," she said. But if she fails? "I don't know. I just don't know. I have to work. It's not an option."

Most American schools take a 10- to 11-week break during the summer. The assumption that underlies summer vacation — that there is one parent waiting at home for the kids — is true for just over a quarter of American families. For the rest of us, the children are off, the parents are not. We can indulge our annual illusion of children filling joyful hours with sprinkler romps and robotics camp or we can admit the reality: Summer's supposed freedom is expensive.

In 2014, parents reported planning to spend an average of $958 per child on summer expenses. Those who can't afford camps or summer learning programs cobble together care from family members or friends, or are forced to leave children home alone. Self-care for 6- to 12-year-olds increases during the summer months, with 11 percent of children spending an average of 10 hours a week on their own. In July 2014, a South Carolina woman was arrested when she left her 9-year-old in a park while she worked. Parents afraid of being at the center of a similar incident may be more likely to park their kids in front of the TV.

In summer, the lack of affordable child care and the achievement gap collide for lower income families. Most kids lose math skills over the summer, but low income children also lose, on average, more than two months of reading skills — and they don't gain them back. That puts them nearly three years behind higher income peers by the end of fifth grade, and the gap just keeps getting wider. Researchers credit the summer slide for about half of the overall difference in academic achievement between lower and higher income students.

Much of that can be prevented by a summer learning program. In 2013, about a third of parents surveyed said one of their children participated in such a program; just over half said they would want their children to participate if they could find an affordable program.

"I wish I could find a nice camp where she could go, with activities, that didn't cost an arm and a leg," said Roxana Castillejos, who is still looking for options for her 8-year-old daughter. "I'd love something like a camp in the movies, but those are $500 or more a week." She's found day camps available for about $175 a week, but once Ms. Castillejos, a law clerk in Las Vegas who makes around $550 weekly, has covered the basics — rent, utilities, food — there just isn't that much left.

“I pretty much live paycheck to paycheck,” she said. “I make too much to qualify for any help. We do get — don’t laugh — $16 a month in food stamps.” Unless she finds something else, she plans to leave her daughter mostly in the care of friends and family.

Parents looking for the least expensive programs have to start early, and move fast. “I started looking pretty much the minute I got this job,” said Ambre Osborne, who started work in February as a patient care coordinator for a hearing center in Las Vegas and needed a summer day camp for her 7-year-old daughter. “Most of the camps I found ran $225 a week,” she said. The city-run camp she wanted cost just $100 a week, and it filled up in less than a day. “It was like I was waiting for concert tickets. I was like, I will be there — I need this!” She managed to get her daughter a place, but counting the $250 a week they already pay for their 2-year-old son’s day care, Ms. Osborne and her husband will be spending 23 percent of their weekly income on child care this summer.

Numbers like that aren’t uncommon. The Department of Health and Human Services defines “affordable child care” as taking up no more than 10 percent of a family’s income, but typically, only upper income families fit into that category.

“Summer is the moment that really epitomizes the child care crisis,” says Julie Kashen, policy director for the advocacy group Make It Work. “Our system doesn’t take into account that most parents are working. Summer is when it really hits home.”

WOULD we be better off if we just got rid of summer?

In countries like Germany and Britain, the typical break lasts about six weeks. And a few American schools and districts have class year-round, with shorter vacations spread throughout the seasons. This helps prevent learning loss, but leaves working parents in essentially the same position. “I’d fall into the same problems,” Ms. Castillejos said. “They still are off for the same amount of time, just in intervals.” Besides, she went to one of these no-summer schools growing up and “hated it.”

In other words, summer break is an American tradition, even for the parents who are hardest hit by its disruption and expense. It’s not the calendar that’s the problem, they say, but the lack of support for working parents.

A real investment in affordable summer learning programs could improve children’s success in school, while relieving their parents of a stress that shouldn’t be part of the season we still refer to as “vacation.”

For now, what limited funding there is for summer learning programs comes from federal, state and private grants, like the Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant, and has to stretch to cover after-school programs as well. “The demand is just bigger than what exists,” said Erik Peterson, vice president of policy at the Afterschool Alliance. “Summer is really a big piece.”

Support offered to individual parents, from child care subsidies to the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, can be applied toward appropriate summer programs, but it also falls far short. According to the Center for American Progress, in 2011, 22 states had waiting lists for child care assistance, and just one in seven children who qualify for a direct child care subsidy in their state or community actually receives it. These programs are grants, not entitlements, and when the applications exceed the available funds, many are denied.

“I just want her to be able to do those great activities that would make her summer memorable,” said Ms. Castillejos of her daughter. Instead, her daughter’s summers are looking like the ones she remembers from her own childhood: “By the time I was 12 or 13, my mom had to leave me at home by myself. She had no other choice.” Ms. Castillejos still hopes to be able to give her daughter the fun summers she knows some kids experience — but it doesn’t look like it will happen this year.

KJ Dell’Antonia is a columnist and contributing editor to The New York Times’s Well Family.

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