SMILES OF A SUMMER
ACTIVITIES TO BROADEN STUDENT HORIZONS AND SPARK AND CULTIVATE INTERESTS
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Introduction from the author of The Interested Child

I have tried to keep many of these ideas low-cost or even free. Where I can, I’m recommending public libraries or the internet as sources. A few of the items starred as Big Ideas items are expensive or can be complicated, and some of these specifically mention the idea of looking for financial aid.

I’m also pre-supposing that the parents or guardians are inclined to help the child become independent at an appropriate age—to go to a library alone, say, or use public transportation. These determinations are in the hands of the parents and guardians, but it has been our experience as parents that independence and curiosity often go hand in hand.

The big thing here is reflection. It’s specified in a few, but the idea with all of these is to have the student engage in some reflective conversation or even writing—and that includes texting and email—with someone else, be it a family member, teacher, or a friend. To do something is one thing, but to do something and think out loud about it with someone who can serve as a sounding board or ask provocative questions, is to grow as an intellectual and social-emotional being.

Finally, there is no expectation that any one child will be excited by all or even most of these ideas. They are a menu, from which any child may find only a very few things that look exciting. But the point here is to offer a menu, to understand that sometimes there needs to be a little encouragement toward finding interesting things to do.

And of course, these don’t have to be just “summer” activities—Peter Gow, 2018

The Arts and Creative Expression

• Read a poetry or literary magazine; write and submit something of your own
• Make something really complicated or really large out of pieces from a child’s building toy set
• Learn to play a new musical instrument—fun matters more than virtuosity
• Go to an arts or music camp for a week (many offer financial aid); use the experience to fine-tune some skills and make new friends*
• Attend an art event: a festival, the opening of a gallery show, or even a play or concert
• Buy (or go to a library) and read a magazine about the arts from cover to cover.
• Spend an hour a week creating a painting or sculpture; keep improving it—or create a whole collection; when you’re done, ask some friends, or maybe your art teacher, to come by for your own personal “gallery opening.”
• Create a scaled-up version of some simple object—say, a six-foot lollipop
• Shoot a series of photographs with the goal of capturing just one wildly beautiful image of something, someplace, or someone
• Go to a play or other arts performance at your local high school
• Keep a sketchbook in which you record and illustrate your observations, thoughts, feelings, and experiences
• Find someone in your community who makes art or high-quality craft objects, and ask if you can just hang out for a while and observe
• Visit an art museum or gallery and write down some of your thoughts on the visit
Language, Literature, History, and the World in Books

- Write seven poems; six just aren’t enough
- Find and read the book that is the basis for a film that you have liked
- Write a script and then make a storyboard for a film you would like to make
- Watch an old silent feature film from start to finish without stopping it (your library will probably have a few in its collection), and discuss or write down your thoughts on the experience
- Read a number of books by the same author
- Find a hardcover book that is about to be thrown away and very carefully disassemble it to see how it has been put together
- Trace your family history back as far as you can
- Assemble your own personal book of quotations
- Find an old or historical map and compare it with a modern map of the same place
- Read a book in translation from a language and/or culture that you know relatively little about
- Write a children’s book, and illustrate it yourself, or ask a friend to help; then field test your book by reading to children of the right age; ask them for feedback, and make changes until you have a book that kids really like—and once you know have written something appealing, find someone to publish your book
- Go to a library and read from cover to cover a general magazine about society and culture, like The New Yorker, The Atlantic, or Harper’s

Civic and Community Engagement

- Go to a themed community festival (historical, agricultural, cultural, just honoring someone—there are many kinds of these)
- Go to the offices of your most local newspaper, and see if there is anything you can do there as a volunteer
- Attend a meeting of a village, town, or city government or committee
- Write a letter to a public official suggesting a solution to a problem you see in your community, state, or country
- Imagine something that you would like to be different at your school and write a thoughtful, respectful letter to the superintendent, principal, or head explaining your idea and why you think that it should be considered
- Get a volunteer gig working for a town or city agency or a political or community action organization*
- Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine on an issue you care about

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

- Master a pre-electronic form of mathematical calculation like the abacus, Vedic math, or chisanbop
- Learn how to read a weather forecast and a weather map
- Become really good at a strategy- or mathematics-based card or board game
- Find an opportunity to use a serious telescope at a local observatory, astronomy club, or with a relative or friend who has one
- Find a local scientific or medical laboratory (try a college or university) or a company whose work is primarily involved with science or engineering; see if you can spend a few days observing, or perhaps even offer to volunteer*
- Find a bird guide and start trying to identify the birds you commonly see and hear

* A Big Idea that will likely require serious planning and perhaps special resources or funds

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• Observe something and keep a record on a daily basis
• Go to a library and read from cover to cover a magazine about science or some branch of science
• Learn a common communication code like Morse or “wig-wag”
• Learn to identify at least three constellations, the North Star, and a couple of planets
• Build a “machine” out of junk and duct tape or other cheap and easy-to-find materials
• Look for patterns in nature—start by learning about Fibonacci numbers and then hunting for them
• Acquire your Technician Class amateur radio license; find a question book and study for and take the test
• Build a precise scale model of something
• Acquire some kind of magnifying glass or pocket microscope and look at snowflakes, sand, dirt, or anything else that you think might be kind of interesting
• Learn to identify five (or ten) different types of trees
• Navigate! Next time you take a journey, either by yourself or with friends or family, take over the map-reading and rout-finding duties
• Choose some object that you use or some food that you eat regularly; research and then write the story of how that object or food was produced
• Acquire a reasonably good-quality compass and learn the basics of navigation

Just Plain Old Exploring

• Attend a presentation on a topic that interests you by an interesting speaker or lecturer at a local college or university
• Take a ride on public transportation; if you already do this regularly, go somewhere unfamiliar
• Keep a journal
• Bake a loaf (or two) of bread
• Listen to an entire episode of This American Life on National Public Radio
• Turn off the television for a week (or a month)
• Imagine renting an RV and driving across the country; trace your route on a map and imagine where you would stop along the way
• Challenge an adult in your household or immediate world to a formal debate: choose a topic, set a date, and prepare
• If you can find one in your area or somewhere you might be traveling with your family or friends, take a factory tour
• Become an expert on something—anything
• Watch The PBS NewsHour on your local public television station for entire week. Do you miss the commercials?
• Take a course on a college campus*

Sports, Fitness, and the Great Outdoors

• If there’s a sport you enjoy, consider going to a sports camp this summer to fine-tune skills and make new friends; many offer financial aid*
• Climb a mountain (or a hill) or hike a trail; take an adult or two with you and follow good environmental and safety practices on the trail
• Learn to juggle
• Participate in a big local citizen/amateur sporting event; you can participate as an athlete or a volunteer helper

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• Practice an amazing (but safe) feat of balance, like standing on one foot for a long time or carrying something on your head
• Learn to identify at least three different kinds of animal tracks
• Get some friends or relatives together and camp out for a night (or more)*
• Read from cover to cover a magazine about a sport you don’t know anything about
• Go on a whale watch, visit a nature center, or take a hike to observe nature
• Try a new sport in each of these areas: team, individual, land, water
• Pick a minor league baseball team and follow its fortunes through the newspaper or on the internet

Service and Helping Others

• Find your oldest living relative or close family friend and ask them to tell you stories; write these down and share them
• Take care of an animal—as a volunteer at a zoo, an animal shelter, or a veterinarian’s office
• Choose a household chore or responsibility to take on without being reminded or even thanked
• Find a sports league for younger children in your community and offer to help officiate or coach*
• There are thousands of agencies and organizations seeking volunteers—find some and see how you can help
• Make a project of picking up all the litter on a single block of a street or short section of a road every day for a set period of time; keep a record of what you pick up and when—and of course be careful of cars!
• Offer to help out for a few hours a week with an older or infirm neighbor or family member
• Think of something that you are good at and find someone you can tutor or teach—could be art, could be algebra, could be reading, could be basketball, could be...
• Go to a local cemetery and see if there is volunteer work for you there

The World and Its Cultures

• Plan and then take an imaginary tour around the world
• Explore a museum or cultural collection at a local college or university
• Listen to an entire episode of On Point on public radio; call in with something thoughtful to say
• Go to a library and read from cover to cover a magazine about history (past or current) or archaeology
• Find the closest piece of Native American territory to where you live and, if you can, pay a visit
• Go to a restaurant featuring a kind of national or ethnic cuisine you’ve never tried; whatever you do, don’t order a Coke
• Read from cover to cover a magazine about a place that you might want to visit or live in some day
• Find a radio or television broadcast in the modern language you study or would like to study at school and listen to it for a half-hour every week
• Go to a concert or performance of music from a tradition you’ve never listened to before
• Explore a place—in person or virtually—that is part of your heritage; it could be a neighborhood, or it could be a country*
• Attend a sporting event that comes from a culture other than your own—cricket, bocce, Irish football
• Go to a grocery store that specializes in a national or ethnic cuisine you don’t know much about—try some new snack food and an unfamiliar beverage
• Spend some time in a place where English (or whatever your native language might be) is not in common use; this could even be a cultural center or even a shop in particular neighborhood

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• Find a way to start learning a new language—online, on CD from your library, at a local cultural center
• Attend a service or rite of a faith tradition that is not your own; go with an adult and watch others carefully so that you are behaving respectfully and properly

Business and Entrepreneurship
• Invent something or come up with an original idea for your own business
• Try selling a work of art or literature that you have created
• Find a local business that will let you volunteer as an “intern” or helper*
• Organize and run a small business with some friends*
• Find a product or company you are interested in, find it on the stock market, and follow its fortunes there
• Earn a sum of money with a simple business you think up and run all by yourself, then donate the money to a charity or cause of your choice

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