

Don't put a bookmark in reading for the summer

Written by Hennepin County Commissioner Mike Opat
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There's no better time of year than summertime for any kid, including my three. Another school year has passed by, and responsibilities are limited to summer sports, household chores, perhaps a summer job.

Kids and teens get a chance to shake the title of "student" and enjoy themselves for what seem like the fastest few months of the year. But even after the school year ends, keeping kids and teens engaged in books throughout the summer is crucial to their future.

Research clearly shows that young people who don't read over the summer can lose several months of reading skills, starting their next school year at a disadvantage. Over several summers, there can be dramatic damage done to reading skills by the time a student reaches high school, regardless of other beneficial summer activities they participate in. Children with poor reading skills have been shown to be more likely to drop out of high school and be at risk for involvement in crime and other unfortunate outcomes.

The best way to keep engaged is for parents to have books around the house, and for their children to read them. Fortunately for all of us, Hennepin County has a great library system that focuses on literacy-based programming in the summertime and makes the activities fun and relevant.

Hennepin County Library has many initiatives to help kids jump-start their summer reading and be ready for the next school year. These include the "Guys Read" and "Girls Only" book clubs, Science Museum of Minnesota programs that make science relevant to everyday life, Minneapolis Institute of Arts programs that explore drawing techniques, wildlife activities offering a close-up look at reptiles and other live animals, and dozens of others—all free and available throughout the summer at Hennepin County libraries. You can see the complete summer program schedule online at www.hclib.org

I always try to stress the importance of reading to my kids, especially the fact that with summer reading, you can find time uninterrupted by homework to explore your own interests. If you need help or suggestions, the friendly library staff will be happy to assist, or you can also find titles on the library's KidLinks and TeenLinks web pages.

Kids should aim to read four to six books every summer to prevent summer reading loss—that's only about a book every three weeks. June is historically our rainy season, so take advantage of those days when playing outside isn't an option and get a head start.

I know that as summer begins and the days grow longer, reading can sometimes be a tough sell for both kids and their parents. But just a few hours a week with a good book from your local library will keep kids' mental engines firing on all cylinders. It might even slow down what seems like the shortest season of them all.