Summer vacation is a time ripe with opportunities for growth – a time to catch-up on academic learning, strengthen executive functioning, and improve social and communication competence. Opportunities abound during the summer months to engage in learning outside of the traditional classroom by participating in varied activities that are not available within school settings. The summer months can provide a time for students to participate in structured programs that maintain and reinforce knowledge gained during the school year. Well-structured summer programs offer adolescents and young adults real-life experiences in which they can apply their academic knowledge, make gains in interpersonal skills, and improve executive functioning skills (e.g., organization, time management, decision making). It is especially important for youth with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to spend their summer months wisely and productively so that gains achieved during the school year are maintained and enhanced through experiences in authentic settings.

On the other hand, summer brings with it a break from everyday school routines so that students may fall out of the pattern of using learned executive functioning and social skills. Skills, such as organization and study habits, time management and scheduling, and participating in the social interaction required in classroom activities can be forgotten through lack of use. These are essential skills for all persons, not only during one’s time as a student, but also as an individual travels through life. It is important to continue to develop and maintain executive functioning and social skills, and summer affords a more relaxed opportunity to do so through enjoyable learning experiences.

By maintaining crucial social and academic demands during summer vacation, students with ASD may be better able to begin the next school year with increased awareness and confidence. Research has shown that youth who participate in some form of educational activity during the summer months are less likely to lose skills than those that do not participate in summer programs (Walker, Barry, & Bader, 2010). School-aged children have access to a wide range of options for summer programs that may not be suitable for adolescents and young adults. Many of the summer opportunities that are available to younger children are no longer age-appropriate for students as they enter their teen and young adult years. This situation is especially problematic for adolescents and young adults with challenges in academic learning, executive functioning, and social interaction. For these reasons, programs that offer experiences tied to the development of executive functioning competence and social engagement during the summer are particularly beneficial for young adults in order to provide them with the opportunity to reinforce and strengthen both academic and social skills.

One new program, now in its second year, is New Frontiers in Learning’s Summer in the City program, which provides a stable and supportive environment during the summer months. Because it is designed for high school and college students with ASD and related learning differences, Summer in the City helps students to build the skills they need while connecting socially with a group of peers. Participants form friendships that endure through the summer and beyond. Students can participate in one, two, or three-week sessions held from June through August in midtown Manhattan. They develop a sense of belonging to a community while working on a variety of skills both academic and social in nature.

Summer in the City participants work on academic skills, including reading and writing at the high school or college level, self-advocacy, self-determination, and independent living skills. High quality strategy instruction builds overall executive functioning competence while students learn to negotiate social relationships. The New Frontiers summer program also provides young adults with the opportunity to participate in exciting summer activities throughout New York City. Activities are student-driven, planned, and led. The staff structures activities to enable youth to safely engage in cultural events throughout the city to help them to become independent young adults.

The Summer in the City days begin with a warm welcome and the development and review of a daily plan. Each day, students and staff come together as a team and have meaningful check-ins before the day begins, usually with discussion about interesting news events. Mornings are devoted to instructional sessions, tailored to student needs. Students learn to express and understand viewpoints and opinions on current subjects and events through research. They engage respectfully and respect different viewpoints that their peers bring to the table. Lunch is a time where students socialize, relax and express their interests to the group in a comfortable atmosphere. Every afternoon the students and staff embark on planned exploration of the City’s limitless resources.

Many students graduate from high school unprepared for the academic and social demands that will be placed on them in the postsecondary environment. In fact, academic and social demands placed on students in college are very different from those required in high school and can create obstacles for those with ASD. The utilization of well-planned summer programming is a critical key to the development and maintenance of students’ academic and social skills. Summer in the City is a comprehensive summer program that provides a combination of academic skill enrichment with social/cultural activities. Through these activities and ongoing mentoring, students are better armed to return to their high school programs and/or to excel in college.

Colleges assume that first-year undergraduate students are entering their freshman year with proficiency in reading and writing, test-taking, time management, study and organizational skills. Students with ASD may be receiving a high level of quality support in high school. However, it is likely that they will not have the same types or amount of supports in college. This is where summer programming can be helpful by providing activities that teach leadership in life, personal budgeting skills, reading and writing at the college level, and stress management techniques. To this end, New Frontiers’ Summer in the City days include activities such as a book club that is focused around a book of the students’ choosing, current events discussions, creative writing, and test preparation. Morning hours are centered on thought provoking activities designed to enhance executive functioning skills while applying strategies to succeed in real-life spontaneous situations. Of major importance for high school and college success are independent living skills, as well as social and self-advocacy competence to navigate the everyday world. New Frontiers’ programs prepare students to live independently on campus and to become fully participating members of their college community. From residential housing, to campus navigation and participation in clubs and events on campus, summer programming is the perfect time to develop the skills necessary to be successful in such environments. Learning how to research, plan, and organize social events and activities, as well as create and invite a social network of friends to share the experiences is integral to students living independently and happily, and takes priority as a goal for Summer in the City participants.

Students must be able to advocate for themselves in a positive and proactive manner, which will allow them to experience academic and personal success. Summer in the City is an opportunity for youth with ASD to gain important skills that are needed to meet the rigors of the postsecondary environment and beyond. Further, summer is an ideal time to develop and maintain students’ transition skills. The development of transition skills should be central to preparing students for college and adulthood. The use of real world learning experiences to develop such transition skills is critical. At the heart of the New Frontiers Summer in the City program is participation in New York City experiences and adventures. Lasting friendships develop among staff and students alike. Summer in the City afternoons are designed to expose students to a wide variety of exciting cultural experiences as they explore the many wonderful sights and sounds of New York City. Some of the exciting places that students have visited include: Coney Island, New York Aquarium, Museum of Natural History, Hayden Planetarium, Central Park, Bronx Zoo, walking tour of The Brooklyn Bridge, and The Intrepid.

Money management skills are built into the students’ day as they try to balance each week’s activities with cost in mind, tapping into what the city has to offer for low or no cost activities as well. The development of independent living skills are naturally infused throughout the day, and include development in the areas of community safety, travel planning, subway navigation, and teamwork.

Involvement in enrichment programs can help to prevent regression in executive functioning, social, and academic skills (Cooper, 2003). While daily structure and routine are critical programming elements for youth with ASD (Lee, Odom, & Loftin, 2007; Sticher, Randolph, Gage, & Schmidt, 2007), there are many ways to provide structure in settings that are fun, stimulating.
and growth inducing. Active involvement by students in school and enrichment programs provides experience to promote students’ self-advocacy ability and build self-determination to help them succeed in school and in life (Hughes, Cosgriff, Agran, & Washington, 2013). Well-structured supervised summer enrichment programs can lead to lifelong positive outcomes (Thiemann & Kamps, 2008). By basing instruction and activities on students’ learning styles, preferences and strengths, *Summer in the City* can turn summer vacation into a time of growth and friendship.

Alissa Daner, MSEd, is Academic Coordinator; Marty McGreevy, MEd, is Westchester Coordinator; and Samantha Feinman, MSEd, TSHH, is Director for Student Support Services at New Frontiers in Learning. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Samantha Feinman, Director of Student Support Services, New Frontiers in Learning, sfeinman@nfilm.net.

References


