

The extended family: Aunts and uncles

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

We all know grandparents are terrific, right? But what about a special aunt or uncle?

Aunts and uncles are part of our extended family. As parents, we may remember the aunts and uncles we had growing up. Our relationships with them probably varied considerably. Aunt Agnes was a stern, tight-lipped woman we feared, for example. Aunt Mary crocheted dresses for small dolls and showed that it was OK to wear nail polish despite Mother's attitude to the contrary.

Aunts and uncles demonstrate that adults, especially in our own families, can be widely different as individuals. In some cases, they are fun and take us fishing or to movies. In other cases, they are serious and step in to help when parents become ill, broke, or separated.

Relationships with aunts and uncles can be important, even when they live far away and nieces and nephews don't see them often. Nurturing those relationships can be beneficial in many ways, including the following:

- making happy memories that last a lifetime,
- understanding kinship—that certain aunts and uncles are a parent's siblings, while other aunts and uncles joined the family as partners to those siblings,
- having positive role models, like Aunt Bessie who worked to graduate from nursing school and rear three daughters on her own,
- hearing family folk tales, like the time Uncle Elry used a sheet like a parachute to jump from a water tower,
- providing exposure to different cultures and interests, like Uncle Jim's playing the accordion,
- offering stability in times of a parent's absence because of job training or military service,
- serving as a role model in place of a missing parent,
- understanding potential genetic predispositions to

- health problems like cancer or alcoholism,
- providing a temporary place to live after storm or fire damage to one's home,
- lending money to cover college tuition or down payment on a house,
- providing economic support after a job loss or during a long-term illness, and
- giving material and emotional support in times of crisis, like debilitating injury or death.

ADULTS CAN BE WIDELY DIFFERENT AS INDIVIDUALS.

We can nurture relationships with aunts and uncles—and other members of our extended families—in many ways. As parents, we decide whether particular relationships are safe and appropriate. If so, we can encourage contact at family events such as holiday gatherings and reunions, or through social media such as Facebook.

Reading books with our children can also help them learn about aunts and uncles. Buy these books online or borrow them from the library. The following books offer a start.

- *Auntee Edna* by Ethel Footman Smothers, picture book for kindergarten to 3rd grade
- *Aunt Flossie's hats (and crab cakes later)*, by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard, a picture book for preschool to 3rd grade
- *Aunt Mary's rose* by Douglas Wood, for kindergarten to 3rd grade
- *The king of bees* by Lester L. Laminack, picture book for preschool to 2nd grade

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- *Pig Pig returns* by David McPhail, picture for preschool to 1st grade
 - *The secret remedy book* by Karin Cates, picture book for preschool to 2nd grade
 - *Super snow day* by Michael Garland, picture book for preschool to 4th grade
 - *Uncle Jed's barbershop—Tia Isa wants a car* (also in Spanish) by Margaret King Mitchell, picture book for preschool to 3rd grade
 - *Willie and Uncle Bill* by Amy Schwartz, picture book for preschool to 3rd grade
 - *When lightening comes in a jar* by Patricia Polacco, picture book for preschool to 3rd grade. ■

Avoid summer brain drain

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Many child care programs make an effort to provide lots of fun activities for children during the summer. School-age children, from kindergarten through primary grades, welcome the rest from homework and often delight in new activities such as swimming and field trips.

But educators often bemoan the interruption in academic progress. The lapse in reading and math increases the chances that children will forget some of what they've learned—referred to as *brain drain*. In the fall, instead of starting where they left off in the spring, they must review and re-learn previously covered material.

Your child care program can help avoid this summer slide by providing activities in reading and group discussion, incorporating math into activities (like cooking and woodworking, for example), and encouraging imagination and creativity in art, dramatic play, and science activities.

As parents, we can help children avoid academic slippage as well. No, this doesn't mean using flash cards or hiring a tutor. Rather we can do short, simple activities at night and on weekends. Some ideas:

- Read aloud with children for 10-20 minutes every day. Ask questions about the characters and the story. Let them check out books of their own choosing from the library. Or listen to an audiobook or podcast.
- Engage children in conversation. Ask them what they liked or didn't like about a recent TV show or movie or baseball game. Talk about how an event made you feel glad, sad, or confused. Conversation encourages language and brain development.
- Challenge children to learn a new word every week. Have them look up the word in a dictionary or online and keep track in a notebook. Try this with a second language.

- Encourage children to write postcards, thank-you notes, and letters to friends and family.
- Limit TV watching and video games to not more than 1-2 hours a day. Monitor children's screen time to ensure it's appropriate to their age and emotional development.
- While riding in the car or on the bus, have children count yellow cars, look for out-of-state license plates, read billboards, or point out other landmarks. Using your watch or cell phone, let them time how long it takes to get from point A to point B.
- Set up a puzzle on a tabletop or other flat surface. Work on it with children, showing how to distinguish borders, colors, and shapes.
- Invite children to try something new, such as a sport like pickle ball, a game like checkers, or a hobby like collecting coins or stamps.
- Explore the outdoors. Collect rocks, bugs, and leaves. Compare colors and shapes.



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- Draw a map of a park or neighborhood. Write street names and label buildings and homes.
 - Photograph a landscape, sunset, or creek. Print out pictures and make an album.
 - Tend to plants growing in a flower bed, garden, or large containers. Talk about propagation, soil, fertilizer, sunlight, and watering.
 - Let children help plan a visit to a relative's home or take a trip to a historic landmark, museum, or scientific site. Talk about the significance of the trip and find the location on a map.
 - Provide art materials—paints, crayons, markers, and paper of all kinds. Avoid evaluating and criticizing. Instead, recognize and encourage effort.
 - Encourage volunteer activities, such as making cookies for the firefighters in the nearest firehouse, organizing a sing-along in an assisted-living facility, helping a neighbor unload groceries, and reading books to young friends.
 - Aim for at least an hour of physical activity every day. Run or bike with children, practice a skill such as throwing or catching a ball, or learn a new dance.
 - Talk with them about the work you do. Explain how you use math or computers, how you apply the science you learned in school, or what you regret not learning more about.
 - Visit a relative or friend whose work is different than yours—an auto mechanic, a plumber, a carpenter, or a health care worker. Find out what they like or don't like about their jobs.
 - Most of all, listen and watch for what children are interested in. What things do they ask about—space travel, frogs croaking in the drainage ditch, stars in the night sky, or superheroes. Help them look up the topic on the Internet. ■