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Filling in the Gaps

A Few Simple Ways to Keep Kids Fed and Enriched this Summer

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Summer. It always seems full of possibilities, especially for kids. With the school year done, students can spend time growing and learning in new ways, whether that's in sports or

camps, exploring the outdoors, or traveling. However, summer also comes with challenges for families who are income constrained.

Since 200K More Reasons began, congregations have filled in the gaps for children when school is out of session. The USDA estimates that only 15% of the children who receive free and reduced lunch during the school year receive those same high-quality meals during the summer.

Some of the struggles with feeding children during the summer have been mitigated by the changes brought about by the pandemic. Transportation to and from feeding programs has always been a hindrance for working families. Yet, waivers allow programs to serve meals where children congregate. In certain circumstances, waivers allow parents to pick up meals on their children's behalf without children needing to be present. Children can also receive multiple meals at one time instead of coming two or three times throughout the day. These opportunities can help eliminate some of the boundaries around keeping children fed over the summer.

Still, it is not just access to food that some students are missing over the summer. Access to summer enrichment opportunities is dependent upon parents' financial situations. For families who are income constrained, summer opportunities for their children are limited. During the summer, these children and youth have lesser gains—and in some cases losses—than their wealthier classmates. This may mean a decrease in reading aptitude, greater exposure to violence and crime, and further weight gain for those with obesity according to a study for the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine.

Finding ways to address these inequities for children from low-income homes can seem overwhelming. However, it does not have to be. Recognizing that families with children at home during the summer have increased needs, and accommodating those needs with increased child-friendly food at your pantry or blessing box, is a helpful way to start. Providing sack lunches to places where children gather can also address the meal gap.

Schools continue to be the best way to connect to children in need. Check with your local school about their plans to provide meals this summer. See if they can use additional volunteers to help with the program. If they are not a summer meal provider, they may still be able to help connect your feeding ministry to families in need. Make sure to share the dates your pantry is open or the location of your blessing box with counselors and school administrators.

This summer brings the opportunity to do more for children and families, especially considering the challenges of serving the community last summer. Consider providing family fun packs that include books and games for families involved in your feeding ministry. Bring books and fun activities to your local park with a cookout for families and a story hour for kids. Advocate for and partner with summer programs for children in your community like the Boys and Girls Club or the local library.

Access to books is the first step in doing more to support literacy in our community. Bring your church together to construct and install a little lending library to place beside your blessing box. Offer a pop-up book giveaway at a summer festival or farmer's market to connect to kids and families. Once you get started in literacy ministry, you will want to do more, like plan for a reading camp next summer or a tutoring program in the fall.

Summer should be a time for everyone to have fun. By engaging families with feeding and literacy opportunities, churches can make sure everyone gets to enjoy the summer months.

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