MOM….I'm Bored!
Squelching Summer Boredom
By Jenifer Strauss

It's nearly the end of the school year and soon your kids will be home for the summer. For most families, summer routines are more relaxed and daily schedules are less structured. As a Literacy Coach, one of the frustrations of June, July and August is how much review I have to do with my students in the fall, before I can begin teaching grade level writing skills. To help parents understand the importance of continuity for maintaining and improving their kid's literacy skills, I tell them my story about the summer going into fourth grade.

In third grade I had a teacher who used a big red pen when she graded our writing. I was struggling as a young writer and the red markings on my work did not do anything to build my confidence. At the end of that school year my language grades were low and so was my self-esteem. My mother knew that I was struggling with writing and she knew she had to do something to help me before I entered the fourth grade. I didn't know then that my mother was a genius.

On a hot June day, during the summer that I was entering fourth grade, I made the mistake of walking into the kitchen, where my mother was making sandwiches and saying, "Mom, I'm bored!" Usually, when I told her that I was bored, she would hand me one of two things…the toilet brush or the vacuum cleaner. She would always say, "If you're bored, I will give you something to do!" That day, she didn't hand me the toilet brush OR the vacuum cleaner. Instead, she went into her closet and handed me a hand-painted, wooden box. "What do you want me to do with this?" I asked. "I want you to go outside every day this summer and have an adventure." She answered. Puzzled, I said, "What do you mean?" My mother explained, "I want you to go outside each day and try something new…something you have never done before, but don't get hurt, and don't get in trouble! When you try something new, I want you to choose an object that helps you remember what you did, put it in this box, and bring it home to me. I will try to guess what you were doing.

I was very excited about this idea. Each day that summer I was going to try to stump my mother so she never knew what I was up to.

On the first day of adventures I rode my bike three blocks, through the neighborhood to Marty's house, ditched my bike in the front yard and ran around back. Julie, Kathy, Russ and Marty were already in the back yard. They were standing inside of our natural fort. Years ago, Marty grandfather planted five pine trees in a circle in the back yard. He planted them too close together and now, those pine trees were nearly touching. There was just enough space for us to squeeze through two of them, and stand inside, encircled by tree-trunk walls. Everyone was looking up at the tops of the trees, so I joined them and said,

“What are we doing?” Marty explained, “We are taking the fort to the tops of the trees!” I said, “Cool! How are we going to do that?” Marty pointed to a pile of wood left over from the garage his dad had just finished building. My friends had already gathered saws, hammers and nails. That day we made a wooden ladder that took us to the tops of the trees. We handed boards up to each other, nailed them around the trees, and by the end of that first day, we had a floor in our new treetop fort. The five us sat proudly on the platform, feeling the trees, and our fort sway in the wind. When it was time to go home for dinner, I reached up and grabbed a pine cone from one of the trees, brought it home and put it in my box.

That night before bed, my mom asked me if there was anything in the summer adventure box. I held up the pine cone and said, “Guess what I did today?” She tried by asking, “Did you go for a walk in the woods?” I said, “Kind of.” She attempted another guess. “Did you climb a tree?” I smiled and answered, “Well, kind of”. She couldn’t guess what I had done and so I told her the story. When I was finished telling her about that day’s adventure, my mom gave me a notebook with a plain cover and she said, “That was a wonderful story. Why don’t you write it down?” I didn't have any trouble writing the story in my journal because I had just “lived” the experience earlier that day, and I had an object in front of me that was symbolic and so it engaged my memory and imagination.

Each day that summer, I went out seeking adventures, and each day, I put an object in my box. At night before bed, my mother would attempt a guess, but she never succeeded, and so I would have to tell her the story of my adventure, and then write about it in my journal. By the end of the summer I had twenty-two objects in my adventure box, and twenty-two stories in a notebook with a cover that I had colored to match the box.

On the morning of the first day of school, I walked into the fourth grade classroom with the adventure box in one hand and my journal in the other. I held them both out to my new teacher and announced, “Mrs. Stebbins, I'm a writer!” She said, “That's very good to hear.” I said, “No, you don't understand. When I left third grade I wasn't a writer, and now I am.” That dear woman took my journal home with her on the first day of school and read every story that I had written during the summer. On the next blank page there was a note from Mrs. Stebbins and it was NOT written in red ink. It said, “Jenifer: Not only are you a writer, but you are a good one. I look forward to reading more of your stories this year, in the fourth grade.”

So, how can you help your kids maintain and improve their language and literacy skills over the summer without making it seem like school work? Get a box...any kind of box, and challenge your kids, not only to have summer adventures, but to place an object in the box that reminds them of the new experience they have had. Better yet, create a family Story Adventure Box and encourage everyone to contribute objects that symbolize something that happened to them that day and tell a story about it. The human brain is wired for story. We think, learn and retain

information in narrative, so let your kids “tell the story” of their adventures and really listen to them. After they tell you a story, let them write it down. They can do that in pictures, with words or both. Summer is a wonderful time for making memories, and the best stories come from the images that are evoked by personal experiences. Who knows...this activity may motivate your own family storytelling tradition or inspire your kids to be famous writers. I do know that it will help improve their literacy skills over the summer, and that will pay off in numerous ways when they return to school in the fall.

On that hot summer day when I was nine years old, not only did my mom gift me with a simple wooden box and a notebook, she also gave me the gift of adventure, problem-solving, and imagination. She allowed me to create my own entertainment and by encouraging me to tell and write stories about my experiences, she also gave me the gift of language. That is when my confidence as a writer blossomed and grew. Today, I make my living as a speaker, writing consultant and storyteller and all I can say is, thanks Mom!

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