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# Visit With The Utays

## June 2000

*School Psychology and Education Specialists*

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**D**r. Joe Utay, a graduate of Pitt, has been a counselor, psychologist, family therapist, author, national speaker, teacher, clinic director and father. He earned tenure as a professor training school counselors, marriage and family therapists, and school psychologists; and is now Director of Counseling and Evaluation Services for Total Learning Centers.

Dr. Carol Utay, also a graduate of Pitt, has experience as a Principal, teacher, computer trainer, national speaker, adjunct professor, author, and mother. With a doctorate in education, she has trained thousands of teachers and parents to help children achieve success and feel good about themselves. She is Executive Director of Total Learning Centers. Joe and Carol live and work in Wexford with their daughter Andrea.

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### **To Worry or Not to Worry, That is the Question (of the Month)**

*“This year was pretty good grade-wise, but the last report card had a couple of grades that went down. It was a busy nine weeks, especially with softball. Our worry is that he’ll continue dropping behind in the fall. Should we be concerned?”*

Children must learn in school what to them often appears to have no relevance to today’s softball practice or choosing a cool outfit from a closet of options. If this drop in grades is unusual for your son, it may simply mean that fitting in softball meant less study time, leading to poor preparation for homework, quizzes, and tests, in turn leading to a drop in report card grades. If this is the case, as soon as he goes back to spending adequate time studying, his grades will revert back to where they belong.

On the other hand, (Sorry, but you knew it might not be that simple!) you may indeed have cause for concern. First though, according to Craig Slaubaugh, Principal at North Allegheny’s Hossack Elementary School, “Always discuss the situation with the teacher. Learning is a result of a collaborative team effort and the teacher is the best person to go to first for clarification of potential problems.” We agree! Ask your child’s teacher if he simply missed some key aspects of the curriculum. If so, then just fill those gaps this summer.

If gaps are not clear-cut, testing would be a proactive step to take. An educational evaluation need not be in depth. It just needs to cover the areas in question. However, unclear gaps could also be the result of under motivation. Amy Kleissas, Guidance Counselor at Pine-Richland’s Wexford Elementary School, put it well in a newsletter recently sent home to parents: “As children grow older, they learn about their own interests, abilities, and their natural search for meaning. ... The trick is to help children unlock and uncover their own intrinsic motivation.”

Many parents overlook or at least minimize a very rich source of information concerning why grades have gone down – the child. Ask and then really listen to your child’s own explanation for the drop in grades. Possible responses include but are not limited to: “It was too boring,” “The teacher was bad,” “No one did well,” “He didn’t remind us when tests would be,” “It was just one big test that brought my whole grade down,” “The quizzes weren’t over what she said they would be,” “The teacher didn’t like me,” etc. As silly as many of these seem to us adults, from a child’s perspective they are as good as legally verifiable facts validated by Webster himself. We are not suggesting responding, “Thank you. Now that we know that EVERYONE’S grades went down, we can stop talking about it.” Rather, “So, you didn’t do as well as you usually do and neither did many of the other kids in class.” First, empathy does not have to equal agreement and second, this is one step in a process, not the final one.

A lack of study skills or habits may be the culprit. If so, use some of this summer to help him develop them. Organization of time and materials, taking notes, studying for tests, or reading textbooks become more and more crucial to keep grades up.

**BOTTOM LINE:** 1. In the fall, be careful not to overbook his calendar at the expense of studying, 2. Ask the teacher to pinpoint gaps, then you or a tutor can fill them, 3. If exact gaps are unknown, let focused testing help you figure it out while considering motivation, 4. Ask your child why he thinks his grades went down, 5. Consider study skills training, and 6. As always, remain open to the powerful combination of new information and gut feelings.

**Good luck in helping your child prepare today for success tomorrow!**

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