

Visit With The Utays  
**Begin the School Year Right**  
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*We really want the school year to be more successful for our kids than last year. What do you suggest we do to help them start off strong and prevent problems?*

Summer is a time for kids to play and relax while parents sneak in educational activities disguised as fun-filled experiences. Any enrichment is, by definition, enriching. Cheryl Griffith, Assistant Superintendent for Hampton School District put this well: "We hope the students come back well rested with some nice experiences that will contribute to good learning this fall. Art, computer, math, home and library reading, traveling, and tutoring experiences all will directly contribute to school success." As the school year appears on the horizon and actually begins, think about specific ways to maximize fall success considering your own child's history of successes and challenges.

As summer enrichment experiences start to rap up, create clear and realistic goals combined with an organized plan to reach your goals. As with most easier-said-than-done projects, cut this overwhelming task into bite-size pieces. Is getting to school on time or getting homework done the greatest challenge? Are you mainly concerned about test grades or is your worry more social than academic? The first step is to pinpoint exactly what is making you most concerned.

The next step is to create a *New School Year Resolution* and set up a plan to meet that goal. If getting to school on time is the challenge then committing (not just deciding) to leave home at a certain time might be the family goal. Have the entire family sit down together for this discussion before the first day of school. Brainstorm together what everyone can do to reach that goal. Some ideas that might come up include getting to bed earlier, having breakfast together to have better control over when it starts and ends, reducing morning distractions, etc.

Though a whole family meeting is suggested, we highly recommend that in a two-parent household the parents meet first to focus the problem. Single parents should spend some time thinking about it too before the meeting. It is important that parents know what they want for their family – the bottom line in expectations – before the whole family meets to add their opinions and ideas. The final decision belongs to the parent(s) and this should be made clear before and after the family meeting.

The next step is vital yet often skipped. We call it sabotage prevention. Review the goal and specific plan to meet the goal and then ask, "What might come up that would interfere with reaching this goal?" followed by a discussion of ways to prevent the interference.

When the goal involves improved academic success the plan may or may not be more complex. Some problems appear easy to solve like a mere lack of motivation or an after school schedule of activities that leaves little time for studying. But these and other problems are often full of emotional – not just factual – issues. If you suspect a learning disability (or our preference, "learning difference"), attention problem, or significant social or emotional issues, of course consulting with a professional is a must, especially since there are so many proven ways of helping even severe cases.

Tried and true stress-preventing tactics like an assignment book, setting supervised homework time, and ultra clear expectations are often sufficient. But if you've, "Been there. Done that," you may want to get some outside advice. Ask a trusted friend, call the school and talk to the school guidance counselor or school psychologist, or ask a private educational consultant for ideas. Many have found success taking their child to a learning center, not necessarily for tutoring but a supervised (by a certified teacher) time and place to get homework done right. This takes a lot of stress off both the parents and student.

Once good habits have a chance to become automatic, meeting goals should be celebrated then revised along with plans to reach new updated goals. This continuous process of setting, meeting, and celebrating goals is packed full of life lessons useful well beyond simply preparing this summer for success this fall.