

Visit With The Utays

Summer Education Planning: No, It's Not Too Soon

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Dr. 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, 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.

"I know it seems a season or two too early to ask but I'm already thinking about what if anything I should have my children be doing this summer that's school related, especially since one of them really struggled. Just how important is that though, since clearly their priority is to 'take the summer off' and not do anything that remotely smacks of school."

This is actually excellent timing to begin planning for the summer. Your question can really be split into two separate but overlapping issues: a) "What should I have my children do this summer that would be useful for them academically," and, b) "How do I break the news to them?" Though the second question is important, we will leave that to you to answer believing that it will be significantly easier to convince someone of something once you believe it yourself.

As always, to make most efficient use of everyone's time, the first step is to find out what exactly your children need. The one not struggling may enjoy enrichment activities, but let's concentrate on the other one since the result of not dealing with the struggling can have far more negative consequences than not providing enrichment. Did your struggling child do well in a specific area of study the first grading period and then seem to decline as the year continued? This is most likely a student that was slightly behind last year and the first grading period of review was just what was needed, but then the pace picked up too quickly to keep up. For these students three summer months out of school is just too long. They need some review of last year and even some pre-teaching of next year's concepts to make them stronger students in the fall which may just give them the boost they need into the spring as well.

If your child is inconsistent, then figuring out exactly what is needed is definitely in order. Your child's teacher may be able to pinpoint for you exactly what is missing and what would help to be a successful student next year. Most importantly, do not assume there isn't anything you can do – it is possible to fill in the missing academic "holes."

There is one thing for sure, if your child struggles this year and you don't get help this summer, the problem will build on itself and get much worse. Anxiety and self-doubt become slowly ingrained into an, "Obviously I'm dumb" outlook which in turn impedes taking advantage of help given to fill in the now wider gaps. This is not meant to scare you, merely to point out that, simply put, kids who struggle in school often get tons of evidence that they are indeed dumb even though in reality they may be far from it. Even when teachers and parents are positive and encouraging, these kids just have to look around the room and know there's something missing from their ability to learn. Whether one specific subject or learning in school in general, all kids deserve the best opportunities for academic success and strong self-esteem they are capable of getting.

So, yes you definitely should provide educational opportunities for your children this summer, the specifics of which is now your homework to discover in terms of first, what is needed and second, what is available. As far as your children's perspectives go, you may not get away with re-framing some form of studying this summer as an "exciting learning opportunity," but learning that sometimes you must do some things even if you don't want to (as long as the activities are legal and ethical), is a valuable lesson which further prepares them today for success tomorrow.