

Visit With The Utays August 2002

*School Psychology and Education Specialists
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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, 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.

Minimizing Back-to-School Anxiety About Safety

“Mommy, will they put a bomb at MY school?”

I have some concerns about my children's physical and psychological safety in school, and so do they. As school gets closer, my older child is having nightmares about guns and bombs. My younger child isn't aware of the news enough to be worried but I want her safe. Any recommendations?

We hear two concerns here: 1) your older child's anxieties, and 2) your own anxieties about possible dangers in school. First, the bad news, schools are more dangerous than they use to be. Kidnappings, shootings, and the potential for post-Sept 11th terrorist activities, are all real. Not only are you realistic about potential dangers, you are not alone with your concerns. Most of the fifty million students, plus their parents and guardians, are preparing for school wondering the same thing - how best to be safe in school.

However, professionals in education and school psychology recognize a far more debilitating aspect of this issue than real danger – the fear of danger. Why be concerned about children's fears if those fears are for the most part unrealistic? The answer is that too many children are spending their mental and physical energy focused on potential dangers rather than learning the teacher's lesson du jour.

Tips for Younger Children

All children from age four or even younger should know their home telephone numbers including area codes. Also, as soon as they can learn it, teach your young children your cell phone number, if you have one. Children as young as three years old, and sometimes younger, should know how to “dial” 911 for emergencies. Verbal skills do not have to be well developed for a 911 call to be helpful. Even without saying anything, police will be dispatched.

Plan the route carefully either to school or the bus. Choose the way with the least crossings. Make certain they know how to cross. Children should never veer off the planned route. Make certain they know to stay away from parks,

vacant lots, fields, and other places where there are not many people around.

Make certain your children obey all the rules when they are walking, biking, or riding the bus. Make certain they know to be extra careful in rain, fog, or snow. Set them up to walk to and from the bus or school with others. Teach them to call you if their walking partner is not there. When car-pooling, drop off children as close to the school or bus as possible and stay and watch until they are inside.

You know to teach your children never to talk to or accept candy from a stranger, and today you have to go one step further. As odd as it sounds, teach your children not to help a stranger. Even a stranger in a police officer's uniform is suspect. So teach to be cautious, to think first, to not take any chances.

So, first, implement what you learn from this column, common sense, and other experts you read or listen to. But, if anxious symptoms become significantly more than a child's normal concern about their safety such as, sleep becoming disturbed more than two nights in a row, suddenly not wanting to sleep in their own bed two nights in a row, or not wanting to go to school more than five days in a row, it is time to get face-to-face professional help. Choose a mental health professional (counselor, social worker, psychotherapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist) who specializes in the specific area for which your child or adolescent needs the most help.

Teach your children at all ages to talk to you about people or places that scare them or make them feel uneasy. Teach them to trust their instincts. Listen and take them seriously. The goal is not to completely take away fear but rather reduce or change it to be more manageable, thus helping them to realistically and safely prepare today for success tomorrow.

Please ask! (Read practical *Tips for Older Children and Adolescents* at www.TotalLearningCenter.com or call (724) 940-1090 for a free copy.)