

Boosting Brain Power for Success

"Practice is the best of all instructors."
Publilius Syrus

As the school year starts anew, parents partner with school personnel to help children grow and thrive. It is important for parents to know what the expectations are and what the current research says about best practices for optimal learning.

At the annual International Dyslexia Association (IDA) Conference in Philadelphia last year, Peter Wiley, a psychologist at CHOP, remarked that executive functions, or "getting your act together," have become more important and challenging in schools for many reasons. Students today have more homework, more long-term projects to manage, more scheduled activities and more competing temptations and distractions, especially with video games and social networking on the Internet. Wiley believes that parents and teachers must accept that they have to function as the child's frontal lobe (Organizer) much longer than they may wish; they can withdraw their support as the student learns to manage, usually much later than we think.

Time management and organization are key, and the following are ways you can assist your student. Help set a consistent time and place for students to study each day at home. If needed, help them create a homework plan. Understand their class schedule and encourage them to plan ahead. Begin with a to-do list for the evening identifying what is realistic and must be done for the next day. We advise students to print the class syllabus at the beginning of the week and clip it in their planners. At the same time, students should consistently write assignments in their planners, with arrows to due dates or test dates. Once a week, remind students to clean out their backpacks and reorganize papers.

Students are usually very interested in learning about the brain and how it works, particularly their own brain. In recent years, there has been astounding research, including imaging, regarding the brain and learning. Some of the basic principles are listed here:

- Each brain is unique
- Learning engages the entire physiology
- Search for meaning is innate
- Remembering comes through patterning, practicing and exercising
- Emotions are critical
- The brain needs focused attention and rest (sleep)
- Questioning is important for "active processing"
- Learning is enhanced by challenge; inhibited by stress

Learning consultant Terry Matlin encourages slowing down the brain to accomplish tasks, admittedly a difficult skill to practice. Students should begin studying as early as possible, creating a doable checklist that incorporates small breaks, focuses on what is most important and winds down before bed with quiet reading, etc. The more routines a student can build into habits, the more automatic the tasks will be.

Learning about the brain and how it works equips students with an understanding of their own unique learning abilities. Each student should write a personal learning profile and preferences paper that sets goals and designs strategies to help define how to maximize strengths and practice study skills. Have students share their finished profiles with you. This way, everyone can learn how each student is smart in their own unique way.

At the same time, parents and faculty alike can support the diverse needs of our learners, realizing that all of us vary in readiness, abilities, interests and skills. Through our combined efforts, we can be assured that students will have the tools to successfully boost their brain power.

For more information about the brain and learning, please visit the following websites:

www.allkindsofminds.net

www.brainrules.net

www.funderstanding.com

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