

# Seven Habits for a Healthy Brain

By Cathie Brooks

Just as there are 7 habits for highly effective people, there are 7 habits, which develop highly effective brains! Each habit grows, stimulates and connects the brain's neurons to one another. As the neurons connect, memory and learning happen.

Healthy brains need breakfast. Your brain is the only organ in the body, which cannot store energy. While your brain represents only 2% of your total body weight, it uses 30% of your energy. New research shows children who skip breakfast, the fuel for memory and concentration, have difficulty with problem solving, information recall, numeracy and language. Conversely a breakfast mix of complex carbohydrates and protein quickly restore the brain's nutrient requirements. This can be as easy as peanut butter on whole-wheat toast or bananas on oatmeal. Even pizza has a place at the breakfast table! Start the day with breakfast and you will have a brain fest all day long!

Highly effective brains need rest. Students need a minimum of 7 to 8 hours of sleep. Brain researchers refer to inconsistent bedtimes as 'homemade jet lag'. To be specific erratic sleep patterns desynchronize the brain's circadian rhythms and its homeostatic pressures! Staying up three hours later on weekends is equal to flying across 3 time zones weekly. This jet lag yields brain lag. If you don't snooze you will lose!

Effective brains need to move. Exercise increases the blood flow to the brain, and as a recent Charlotte Observer article cited, this blood flow boasts neural growth and brain connectivity, aka learning! Exercise increases the production of dopamine and serotonin, two chemicals aligned with attention span and motivation. A short, brisk walk or classroom activities that allow for movement every 30 minutes can fuel mental tanks. In other words, move it or lose it!

Healthy brains need time with loved ones. The brain is gregarious and seeks positive, emotional connections. Talking at dinner or working with friends on a group project stimulates positive chemical production and increases blood flow to the brain. Conversely the brain does not perceive text messaging or computer time as a social activity, but rather interprets them as times of isolation. Isolation and stress cause neurons to shrink. Even ET knew that it was better to phone home than to text home!

Effective brains need and use good role models for learning. The brain has mirror neurons. As you watch or listen your brain makes a connection. Athletes have long known the value in observing the correct body alignment for establishing a swing in baseball or golf. Reading to your child activities the neurons your child will use when he begins to read. A child will hear sentences, vocabulary and sequences. Within the walls of our school you and your child can fire the mirror neurons while attending a varsity basketball game, watching a play or taking in the artwork displayed on every hall. You model the skill of careful observation and your child will mirror you. Mirror on the wall whose brain is the smartest of all?

Highly effective brains grow from exposure to and participation in the arts. Neuroscientists working with nonprofit groups are tracking the correlation between participation in visual and performing arts and, high academic performance. Findings reveal specific brain networks for different art forms. There are positive links between music training and reading. Acting improves all facets of memory. Each new network helps to sustain attention and improves cognition, the activity of learning. It's not move over Beethoven; it's more like come on over Beethoven.

Lastly healthy and effective brains know their enemies. Researchers, using new fMRI equipment, found that the stress chemicals produced after playing violent video games. last a full 6 weeks in the brain, after the last game was played. Translation, the negative impact of video games last longer on the brain than smoke from a cigarette stays in a lung. Other researchers are finding negative correlations between the time a TV is on in a child's bedroom and diminishing IQ levels. To turn on a highly effective brain you need to turn off an assortment of high tech devices. Neurons will grow without that glow.

A parent mindful of these 7 habits just might find themselves with a child who has a full mind!