

4 Tips for Positive Learning Experiences

I'm sure it's not a surprise that too much stress is bad for learning. As a learning specialist, I know that students in distress can't possibly focus on the task at hand. No matter how hard they try to commit information to memory, their eyes glaze over familiar images and words while the chemicals in the body and mind insist, this isn't important right now. Your brain knows that being well is more valuable than $(4 \times 5) \times (3 - 8 + 7)$.

Sometimes when I cross the international border the guard in the booth will ask me what I do at Wayne State University, what I used to do in Canada, and then want to know, "So, what do you like more, teaching kindergarten kids or college kids?" My response: "They're actually pretty similar." The needs of learners whether 4 or 19 can be closely related. The way our brain makes learning stick as we age throughout school doesn't change much. This has been a comfort to someone who enjoys teaching many students, many different things. I hope it is also a comfort to you as I describe some ways you can help your at-home learner feel a little less stressed and a little more productive.



MAKE A SCHEDULE TOGETHER

Effective planning is what my college students often lack most. Good planning reduces stress and provides support. Anticipate the step by step breakdown of tasks and how much time they will take to complete. Then, set clear expectations about what needs to be done that day. Whether it's a planner or a calendar on the wall, ask your children when they would prefer to work on tasks, what task they would like to do, and create flexible goals (maybe 1 or 2 a day). Try not to plan learning time when we feel most tired or hungry. For maximum productivity I recommend setting aside 15 minutes of planning time every morning with those who have a considerable amount of work to do. The caregiver/student collaboration makes everyone feel accountable.



REWARD EFFORT NOT OUTCOME

We know in education that mindset matters. How a student feels about school and how we talk about school impacts attitude and approach. Studies show that when we praise effort over "smartness," children are more likely to take risks, bounce back from mistakes, and keep trying until they achieve mastery. Imagine being told you are super smart and incredibly brilliant at math all your life. Suddenly, a new algebra lesson throws you off. The feeling of being challenged is new, scary, and uncomfortable. You're questioning how smart you are and feel sure that making a mistake will unmask you as a failure. If we learn to value challenges and failures as learning opportunities for growth, we are more likely to overcome them. This is known as a Growth Mindset. During this stressful time of learning at home, sitting down to focus for 25 minutes on a math worksheet can be worth 10 gold stars.

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TAKE FREQUENT BREAKS

Brain burnout is real for all of us. We teach our college students the Pomodoro Technique. Basically, you set a time for 25 minutes of work and then a 5 minute break. This cycle continues 5 times but you don't need to adhere to those parameters. Maybe 2 cycles would be best depending on appropriateness and age level. Breaks also help new learning take the time needed to really sink in and process.



THE SECRET TO LONG-TERM LEARNING

Last tip, (this one is my favourite). Imagine you meet a new person today. You learn their name on the spot. You happen to see this person one year later, but your mind draws a blank, "What is their name?" It's understandably hard to retrieve. Now imagine another scenario where you see this person and say their name every single day for a month. Their name is now cemented in memory. This idea of pulling information out of our minds and using it consistently over time strengthens learning. Once we know something well (we can explain it to a friend), we need to continue talking about it, or writing about it, or drawing about it, to keep from forgetting it. This is especially important for high school students when the books get bigger and the timelines get shorter. Re-reading notes or flipping through textbooks isn't a very effective study strategy. For learning to stick, we have to pull information from memory consistently over time. This is called Retrieval Practice. This is why even quick rounds of flashcards can be very effective. If you're worried about students forgetting information over the summer, ask them to turn old tests and worksheets into memory games to keep it fresh and on-hand.

I hope these tools and tips provide you with peace and power. The more we know about how effective learning happens, the more we can work smarter, not harder. If there's one incredible thing I have learned about success in education it's that, the number of peaceful hours you put into studying are second only to the strategies you employ.

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