

# Cub Connection

(717) 246-9312

Windsor Manor Elementary School

April 1, 2019

## Using Brain Breaks to Restore Students' Focus

By [Judy Willis](#)

Early in my teaching career, I was disturbed by a note left by the substitute teacher. She wrote that during the three days she was with my students, they were responsive during the first part of class, but that many of them became inattentive, distracted, and even disruptive after about 20 minutes of her instruction. When I asked the students what had happened, they were of one voice: "She didn't give us our brain breaks."

### **WHAT ARE BRAIN BREAKS?**

For students to learn at their highest potential, their brains need to send signals efficiently from the sensory receptors (what they hear, see, touch, read, imagine, and experience) to memory storage regions of the brain. The most detrimental disruptions to traffic along these information pathways are stress and overload.

Brain breaks are planned learning activity shifts that mobilize different networks of the brain. These shifts allow those regions that are blocked by stress or high-intensity work to revitalize. Brain breaks, by switching activity to different brain networks, allow the resting pathways to restore their calm focus and foster optimal mood, attention, and memory.

### **THE NEUROSCIENCE OF BRAIN BREAKS**

For new information to become memory, it must pass through an emotional filter called the amygdala and then reach the prefrontal cortex. When students' brains become anxious, highly confused, or overwhelmed, the activation of the amygdala surges until this filter becomes a stop sign. New learning no longer passes through to reach the prefrontal cortex and sustain memory. Even if students are not stressed by the pace or content of new learning, a point arises when the amygdala exceeds its capacity for efficient conduction of information through its networks into memory.

Brain breaks can be planned to restore the emotional state needed to return the amygdala from overdrive into the optimal state for successful information flow.

### **BRAIN BREAKS RESTORE BRAIN SUPPLIES**

Neurotransmitters are brain chemicals that carry messages from one nerve cell to the next, across gaps between the cells called synapses. These message carriers are necessary to keep one's calm, focused attention and maintenance of a new memory. Neurotransmitters are in limited supply at each synapse and can deplete after as little as 10 minutes of continuing the same type of learning activity (attentive listening, practice drills, note-taking).

Brain breaks, by switching the type of mental activity, shift brain communication to networks with fresh supplies of neurotransmitters. This intermission allows the brain's chemicals to replenish within the resting network.

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## Calendar of Events

Please visit [www.rlasd.net](http://www.rlasd.net) and click on your school. View 'Calendar' on the home page for a complete calendar of events from August through June as they become available.

- 4/2 - Good News club, 3:30 - 4:45 pm
- 4/3 - Elementary Music Day
- 4/4 - School Board Mtg 7 pm
- 4/9 - FINAL Good News club, 3:30 - 4:45 pm
- Fundraiser pick ups - Gertrude Hawk and sandwiches 4 - 6 pm
- 4/15 - PSSA LA in AM (Gr 3-6)
- 4/15 - Tax Day
- 4/15 - School Board Mtg 7pm
- 4/16 - PSSA LA in AM (Gr 3-6)
- 4/17 - PSSA LA in AM (Gr 3-6)
- 4/18 - Student Flex Day (Students do not report to school)
- 4/19 - No School - Holiday
- 4/21 - Easter
- 4/22 - Student Flex Day (Students do not report to school)
- 4/23 - PSSA Math in AM (Gr 3-6)
- 4/24 - PSSA Math in AM (Gr 3-6)
- 4/26 - Band/String Rehearsals at LJM
- 4/27 - Elem. Art Show 11am @ JH
- 4/29 - Band/String Rehearsals at LJM
- 4/30 - PSSA Science in AM (Grade 4)



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### **TIMING**

Brain breaks should take place before fatigue, boredom, distraction, and inattention set in. Depending on students' ages and focus development, brain break frequency will vary. As a general rule, concentrated study of 10 to 15 minutes for elementary school and 20 to 30 minutes for middle and high school students calls for a three- to five-minute break.

### **BRAIN BREAK STRATEGIES**

Brain breaks do not require disruption in the flow of learning. Simply stretching, moving to a different part of the room, or singing a song can revitalize the brain. Use your learning goals and students' responses to guide you in selecting the best type of brain break. You might decide to use the time to boost mood or motivation, as well as restore the brain's peak performance.

### **MOOD**

To restore the emotional state needed to bring the amygdala back from overdrive, help students build habits of emotional self-awareness and mindfulness. Prepare them for successful self-calming brain breaks by demonstrating and providing practice times as they build experience using mindful breathing or visualizations.

Neuroscience has yielded information on activities that increase restorative neurotransmitters such as dopamine. Some of these activities, such as laughing, moving, listening to music, and interacting with peers, make great mood-boosting brain breaks:

- \* Read aloud from a relevant and engaging book.
- \* Introduce physical activity such as jumping rope, singing a song with movements, or tossing a beach ball while students ask and answer questions to review the topic—these are all great dopamine boosters. They also increase the blood flow and oxygen supply to the brain.
- \* Have students move in ways that they think a character in literature or person in history would at a designated event. Or move to imitate a biological, physical, or mathematical process.

### **MOTIVATION**

Especially when topics of study are necessary foundations but are not of high personal relevance to students, brain breaks can enhance their motivation to attend to a potentially tedious subject.

- \* Tell a true anecdote about the author, historical persona, or scientist when they were the same age as your students. This will personalize the topic and boost interest and engagement.
- \* Use dopamine boosts from personal connections and personal relevance by inviting students to share with partners something about how the learning relates to their lives or interests.

After just a few minutes, students' refreshed brains are ready to return to the next learning activity with a subdued amygdala and full supply of neurotransmitters. Both they and you will reap the benefits of this restoration.

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## President's Award for Academic Excellence

Each year, in May, we recognize 6<sup>th</sup> grade students who qualify for the President's Award for Academic Excellence. To receive this prestigious award, students must meet the following established criteria:

- maintain a 3.5 grade average or higher in grades 4, 5, and the first semester of grade 6. AND
- score Advanced on the Grade 5 PSSA assessments in both Reading and Math

**The academic achievement award**, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, was developed to recognize and honor students who have achieved high academic goals through hard work and dedication to learning. If your child has achieved this honorable award, a letter will be sent home in the beginning of April about the celebration scheduled for the end of May.

## State Testing Is This Month

Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) will take place during the months of April/May for grade 3-6 students.

### Testing Schedule for PSSA's:

English Language Arts – **April 15-17**

Mathematics – **April 23-24**

Science (Grade 4 Only)-**April 30-May 1**

*We ask that you do not schedule any educational trips during this time. Thank you in advance for avoiding taking trips during this important time of the year.*

## Elementary Art Department

The 4th Annual Elementary Art Show will be held on Saturday April 27, 2019 from 11am-2pm at the Red Lion Area Junior High School. Every elementary student in the district will have a framed piece of artwork on display by Artome, a National Art Show Company. If interested, your student's framed artwork can be purchased for \$22 on the day of the event (cash only) but please know there is no obligation to buy. Come enjoy light refreshments, interactive exhibits, and an afternoon of art at this fun community event! Visit [www.artome.com](http://www.artome.com) to learn more about Artome Art Shows. To get updates about what our students are learning in art class, follow us on Twitter @RlasdElemArt.

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