

News from Mr. Goers

Special Edition – specifically designed for brain owners!

How can I help my student do better in school?

How can I help my student retain what they've learned?

How can I ensure my student will have the strategies they need to be successful in life?

Parents (and teachers!) have been asking themselves these same questions for years.

I have some new (and some old) strategies and I've been using this year that will help us all achieve our goals.

One of the first hurdles we must overcome is helping students be attentive to the task at hand. We want to avoid the old “in one ear, and out the other” syndrome, but only for a very small percentage of what we experience every day. Fortunately, our brains discard a vast majority of the sensory input we are taking in at any one time. There simply is no need for us to pay close attention to everything we see, hear, taste, smell, touch, or emotionally feel every moment of every day. The trick is signaling the brain to pay attention to certain important bits of what we experience. Here are some strategies followed by brief descriptions that will help your child to “**PAY ATTENTION**” at home, and here at school.

Novelty - If you're having trouble “getting through” to your child, try delivering your message in a *surprising* way. The brain is designed to pay attention to, and recall events that are out of the ordinary. Historically this design served us well as daily survival often depended on our ability to notice uncommon “threats” and recall those in future episodes. So go ahead, surprise your child with a new way of communicating your messages. Just be sure not to overuse any one method, or the surprise factor will be lost.

Choice - When students have something to look forward to, or can choose how they'd like to show what they know, they release dopamine, a chemical in the brain, which helps with attention, decision making, and higher level thinking. Choice is power, which is pleasurable, which is good for the brain and learning.

Give them a break – Humans can only take in so much new information before we begin feeling overwhelmed. By providing a mental break, kids have a chance to reload their neurotransmitters and consolidate their learning. Basically, the brains need time to organize what's been learned so far, before it can continue learning. In the classroom, we don't do anything for more than 10-15 minutes without some sort of break.

The next obstacle is **remembering**, or recalling, what has been learned. How many times have you forgotten someone's name right after being introduced, or racked your brain to remember why you came downstairs. It would be impossible (and unnecessary) to remember everything, but here are some strategies we've been using to help move learning past short-term and into long-term storage:

Music – What is the seventh letter in the alphabet? If you're like me, you sung the tune to find out. There is a reason we all remember the otherwise random order of letters, and lyrics to songs you haven't heard in decades. Memories are stored as bits in areas all over the brain depending on how they are input. By using music, we can use another storage area that would have otherwise gone unused, and recalling the information is as easy as remembering the tune.

Move around – Movement is fundamental to the existence of the brain. Only organisms that move from place to place require brains. So while you're singing that new tune, create a new dance! Movement, especially movements that involve crossing limbs over the imaginary line that runs between our noses and belly buttons, forces both hemispheres of the brain to communicate better. Exercise not only wakes you up and fuels the brain with oxygen, but it also feeds it neurotrophins (high-nutrient chemical “packages”) to increase the number of connections between neurons.

Chart it out – by making a picture or graphic representation of the new learning, students are providing something for the information to cling to. We are all “visual learners”. By mapping out the information using pictures, or even symbols, students incorporate the occipital lobes, and give the content another location for storage. By redrawing, or even thinking of the representation again, students can recall the corresponding information. So go ahead, have your child draw a cartoon depicting the chores they need to complete before they turn on the TV.

The final objective I have as an educator and parent is to prepare kids for a successful future.

Reflection – As adults, we are constantly thinking back on events and experiences, making sense of confusing situations, solving problems, and making judgments about what we would do differently next time. Kids may be aware that they “don't get it”, but might not know that all they really need to do is wrestle with the information inside their own heads a bit. By internalizing and reorganizing learning in a way that makes sense to them, students are re-firing and strengthening the connections formed during the initial learning. Sometimes all kids need is time.

Be active in the learning process – We've all heard the adage about remembering what you hear, see, do, and teach. There's no denying that the person who is *doing*, or *teaching*, is the person who is *learning*. Sitting in one place and listening is not something we do in the classroom very often, because it just doesn't work. We're not using enough of the brain. I find that the kids remember what they *do* or *teach* each other much better. So if you have something important to teach your kids, have them do it while you guide them. Or better yet, pretend like you have no idea how to do something, and have them walk you through it.

Make mistakes – My 2 year old daughter knows what “hot” means. She learned by mistake. But she'll never forget. Making mistakes might be a little embarrassing, but it is a great way for your brain to focus on a task. Confusion (in short doses) is a natural focusing agent in the brain. So go ahead, let them fail, and let them know when you do

too! I try to stress to the students how important it is to take a risk and try, even if they fail. We are all experts on something, but novices at most things!

Relationships matter! - Our brains CANNOT learn when they're feeling threatened. It doesn't matter if the threat is real or perceived. That means if your child thinks someone is saying nasty things about them, chances are they have no idea what's being taught in class. We have worked hard to create an environment where all students feel valued, safe, and respected. If we don't establish a positive rapport with our kids, we stand little chance of making a positive impact.

So in the end, I'd like them to know the difference between a noun and a verb, how to write a persuasive paper and read with fluency, how to measure temperature in Celsius and multiply 7×8 . Content is important, and the strategies listed above will hopefully help us get there. But if they leave our room in June knowing they were part of a team, that their opinions were listened to and valued, that they had a teacher and classmates that cared about them, and are armed with the confidence to take on challenges in fourth grade and beyond, we have succeeded. Chances are, if I can get them *there*, they will have learned the content too.