

STRENGTHENING THE BRAIN

Many people think of the brain as a mystery. They may believe that a person is born smart, average, or just not good at certain things. However, new research from leading scientists shows that the brain is like a muscle. The brain changes and gets stronger when we use it.

Your son or daughter begins a second period of great change in the brain, starting around age ten. Their brains are growing, right along with their bodies, as they enter adolescence. But just like a muscle, the brain needs challenge and exercise to grow to its full potential. Like a coach supporting an athlete, you can help your youth develop his or her brain!



Brains grow like muscles. How do we know?

Many studies have now shown how the brain changes with experience. In one study, twin rats were raised in two different kinds of cages. Half of the rats lived in bare cages with just food and water. The other half of the rats lived in cages with the same food and water, but they also had puzzles, toys and exercise equipment to play

with. The rats in the cages with toys ran mazes faster than the other rats. Their brains grew heavier too. This research shows that challenging experiences can actually make our brains grow!

Can a belief change the future?

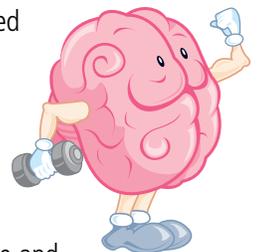
When you believe you can shape and grow your basic qualities, you have a “growth mindset.” Researchers tell us that youth with growth mindsets are more likely to have brighter futures than those who don’t have this belief. Youth can manage life’s challenges and reach great success with three things: effort, adjusting strategies and seeking help.

Unfortunately, some people believe abilities can not change. They believe that people have a certain amount of intelligence and that’s it. They may also believe personalities cannot be changed much either. These beliefs reflect a “fixed mindset.” This mindset prevents youth from learning and growing to be their best.

Youth with a fixed mindset tend to quit when a task feels hard. They try to appear smart by sticking with easy things. These youth don’t see challenge as a chance to grow. Without meaning to, adults with a fixed mindset can limit their children’s potential.

Take advantage of this brain growth period!

The emotional centers of the youth brain grow first. “Thinking” areas aren’t fully developed until age 25. This means that the youth’s brain is ready to be shaped by effort and experience. Through your praise and support of challenging activities, you can help your son or daughter reach for success.



How can you help your youth?

Tip #1: Promote Effort & Learning!

The brain gets stronger with challenge. Help your youth accept challenge by praising his or her effort. Mention details of what you saw. Be specific so that your youth knows you are really paying attention.

Skill:	Instead of saying: 	Try this: 
Lots of effort	"Wow, you make it look easy."	"Your practice is paying off!"
Adjusting strategies	"You keep making mistakes." OR "Would you make up your mind and get this done."	"I really like how you learned from your mistakes." OR "I like how you kept trying new ways to get there. Good job!"
Seeking help	"You need to learn how to do this by yourself."	"You tried hard. Then you asked your sister for help with the math. Great!"

When offering tips for improvement, tell your child that you have high expectations, but you believe they can do it.

Tip #2: Feed the Brain!



Food

The brain is the biggest burner of calories in your body. It burns about one-third of the food your body uses. Eggs, nuts, and fish are some of the best brain foods.



Sleep

The teen brain needs 8-9 hours of sleep each day to run well. When youth don't get enough sleep, they have trouble remembering and learning things. In fact, studies show that test scores are one-third lower for tired youth compared to rested ones.



Exercise

The brain works better when the body gets regular exercise. With exercise, the brain actually grows new cells and learns more easily.



Challenge

When the brain is challenged, it builds thicker connections between brain cells it just used. The thicker the connections, the faster and easier it is to do the task.

Tip #3: Focus!

It is hard for the brain when different kinds of information enter at the same time. The brain will have more trouble saving and finding the information later. Support your youth to avoid texting or watching TV while doing homework.