

# TEST READINESS BASICS

To ensure that student performance on standardized tests accurately reflects what they know and are able to do, there are four healthy habits that can help your students get ready for tests: short bursts of exercise, getting enough sleep, eating breakfast and practicing deep breathing.

## »» Exercise, Learning and Test-Taking Success

The brain isn't a muscle, but like a muscle it needs exercise to grow. Aerobic exercise — like walking, jogging and dancing — helps the basal ganglia in the brain to grow. Found at the base of the brain, the basal ganglia help students pay attention. According to Harvard psychologist John Ratey, exercise doesn't make a student smarter. Instead, it makes the brain more ready to learn. If you want your students to be ready to take a test, you should consider engaging them in some physical activity prior to the testing session.

Getting students out of their seats and moving around improves mental sharpness. Movement increases the flow of blood to the brain, delivering more oxygen, which enhances brain function. During exercise the body makes more brain chemicals, which are linked to students' ability to pay attention better.

Numerous studies have shown how exercise has improved learning. In one Illinois high school, students started their day with physical activity before they went to math class, which resulted in improved test scores. In another study, walking or running for thirty minutes raised problem-solving scores by ten percent. In a North Carolina school, ten minutes of physical activity helped students stay on task longer. Another study showed that twenty minutes of walking improved reading scores.

What kind of exercise works? Any aerobic activity that raises the heart rate and increases the respiration rate may help students get ready for testing. It could be as easy as a ten-minute brisk walk or jog. Dancing to some lively music or playing follow-the-leader up and down the rows between desks in your classroom can be equally effective. You might even try mixing exercise with school subjects as another way to help students learn. For example, research has shown that practicing spelling or solving math facts while doing something active, like marching around the room, can actually build connections in the brain that help students recall those facts.

## »» Sleep, Learning and Test-Taking Success

Another way that the brain is like a muscle is that the brain, too, needs rest so it can work its best. Research shows that kids who get enough sleep do better on math, reading, and vocabulary tests. Those who get enough sleep also get better grades. In order for students to be ready to take tests, it's very important for them to get a good night's sleep.

Sleep scientists are beginning to understand why sleep is so important for learning. A tired brain gets stuck on one answer, often the wrong one. When tired, the brain lacks the creativity to move past one idea to come up with more and better answers. Sleep makes the connections in the brain more efficient, and these connections are important for creating memory. Getting enough sleep also helps concentration. In order for someone to concentrate, the brain must be able to use glycogen (food energy) supplied by blood. Sleep improves the brain's ability to absorb glycogen from the bloodstream.

Here's another important reason for getting enough sleep: during sleep, the brain stores what it has learned. And the more a child learns during the day, the more sleep is needed to remember all that was learned. Sleep is certainly important on the night before a test, but regular adequate sleep is vital for optimal learning to occur.

How much sleep is enough? According to the National Sleep Foundation, school-age kids need ten to eleven hours of sleep a night. On a school night, depending on when a child needs to awaken, most bedtimes should be around 8 p.m.

### Share these tips with your students to help them get enough sleep:

- Cut out drinks that contain caffeine well before supper. The stimulant effects of caffeine can last up to six hours.
- Start getting ready for bed about an hour before bedtime. Turn off all screens — television, computers, cell phones, and video games. Put on pajamas, brush your teeth, and wash up. Get your clothes and school supplies ready for the next day.
- Choose a quiet activity like reading before turning out the light and going to sleep.

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## »» Breakfast, Learning and Test-Taking Success

Much as muscles need energy to move, the brain needs energy to function. When students wake up in the morning, they haven't had anything to eat since the day before. If you want your students to be ready to learn, and ready to take a test, help them restore the food energy supply to their brains by encouraging them to eat breakfast.

As mentioned earlier, the brain runs best on food energy called "glycogen." But glycogen stores are quickly depleted, lasting only a few hours. If a student skips breakfast, there won't be enough glycogen left over from the night before for the brain to function optimally.

Research on the relationship between eating breakfast and academic performance is so compelling that the federally funded free breakfast program was initiated so that all students can be successful learners. The reason: students' math and reading test scores have improved each year the school breakfast program has been in place. Over one hundred studies examining the school breakfast program have shown learning gains in children. Breakfast improves the ability to think, improves students' memory, helps kids pay attention better, and improves mood.

What kind of breakfast is suggested? A good way to replace glycogen is to eat low-fat whole grains with some protein. Whole-grain cereal, toast, or oatmeal are good breakfast choices. Add some protein like nuts, peanut butter, milk, yogurt, cheese, or eggs, and throw in some fruit for natural sweetness. High-sugar foods are better than nothing. But, in truth, they aren't recommended because the food energy they provide doesn't last as long.

## »» Deep Breathing to Overcome Test Anxiety

Do you notice that some students respond anxiously when you announce it's time for a test? Being a little bit nervous about test taking is normal. As a matter of fact, being a little nervous is good because it helps students pay attention and focus. But being too nervous doesn't help at all. Being too nervous makes it nearly impossible to think.

When a student becomes so nervous it interferes with his/her ability to do well on a test, it is called test anxiety. Test anxiety is the feeling of panic one gets right before, during, and even after a test. It makes it hard to pay attention, to think clearly, and to do one's best.

There are many different symptoms associated with test anxiety. Common signs include an upset stomach, headache, sweating, hot or cold hands and feet, dizziness, and panic. When these feelings set in, it is impossible to think — the brain freezes or the mind races. Either way, trying to come up with the right answers is very difficult for students.

Anyone can have test anxiety. The good news is that there is something students can do if it strikes. Using a simple deep-breathing exercise can make all the difference. The steps for performing the deep-breathing exercise are very easy. Step one is to breathe in slowly through the nose, and step two is to slowly breathe out through the mouth. These two steps are repeated until the person begins to feel calm. For best results, it's a good idea to have students practice deep breathing daily (even when not taking a test). That way, if test anxiety kicks in, students will be able to calm themselves and focus on taking the test.

Do you want to get your students ready to take a test? Try leading them through a deep-breathing exercise right before you administer a test. That way, they will be in control of their thoughts and feelings from the start. Remind students that if they begin to notice their brains shutting down, they can take a short break to do the breathing exercises. Deep breathing can be an empowering strategy for students, demonstrating to them that they can regain a sense of calm when things seem out of control.