Why Brain Health May Be the Key to Help Your Child Improve their Grades

Getty | Johner Images

Daniel Amen Oct 3, 2019

Looking for a better way to boost your child or teenager's grades? Sure, you've probably tried those test prep

seminars, study guides, or even online tutoring sites, but all of these options fail to cover the most important secret to success at school — the brain.

Based on the world's largest database of brain imaging related to behavior, we now know that success or failure at school depends on the moment-by-moment functioning of the brain. And no amount of tutoring or exam prep will make up for a brain that isn't operating at optimal levels.

When your youngster or high schooler's brain works right, *they* work right and tend to do well in school. When their brain has trouble, however, they're much more likely to have trouble in school, such as problems with focus, attention, motivation, test anxiety, staying organized, or relating to their classmates or teachers.

To help your back-to-schooler kick those grades up a notch, it's time to take advantage of the latest neuroscience and leading brain imaging.

You're Not Stuck with The Brain You Have

Children and adolescents are experiencing increased amounts of stress and anxiety at a time when their brains are still developing—*and the brain isn't fully developed until the mid-to-late 20s!* Anxiety affects nearly 1 in 3 teens, and there's been a 20% increase in anxiety disorders in children

and teens from 2007-2012. According to a 2018 survey, nearly 45% of high school students say they feel stressed "all the time."

Every school year, I see a wave of students in my clinics who are struggling in school. Some are anxious and stressed about test taking, getting into the right college, or trying to live up to the impossible expectations of social media. Others are wracked with depression and other symptoms due to the effects of emotional trauma or head injuries — whether from tackle football, a spill off a bike or a wipeout on the ski slopes.

Our brain imaging work shows that all of these issues are associated with abnormal brain activity that can cause brain fog, fuzzy thinking, poor judgment, impulsive behavior and trouble with problem solving. It explains why so many smart students are struggling to finish their homework and underachieving in class.

One of the most exciting things I've learned from brain imaging is that your brain can change. If parents, teachers and students work proactively to protect and nourish brain health, even a damaged brain can be healed and optimized.

Identify Your Brain Type

After studying more than 150,000 brain SPECT scans, it's

clear that not all brains are the same. Certain brain patterns are associated with conditions like ADHD, depression, and anxiety. And brain scans reveal a lot about people's personalities — the way they think, act, and interact with others. Based on our research, we have identified five primary brain types.

The good news is your child doesn't need a brain scan to determine the right health approach for their brain. They can simply take our free online Brain Health Assessment quiz to discover if they have 1 of the 5 primary brain types.

Brain Type 1 — Balanced: This group tends to do what they say they're going to do, show up on time, and follow through on tasks. Typically, they dislike risks, but they like rules and tend to stick to them.

Brain Type 2 — Spontaneous*:* These people tend to enjoy doing things on the spur of the moment, love trying new things, and often think rules don't apply to them. They may struggle with organization and can engage in risky behavior.

Potential problems: ADHD, depression, addiction

Brain Type 3 — Persistent*:* These are typically take-charge people who won't take no for an answer. They tend to be tenacious and stubborn. In addition, they may worry, be argumentative and oppositional, and hold grudges from

the past.

Potential problems: Anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)

Brain Type 4 — Sensitive: People with this type tend to feel deeply about their family, friends and all fellow humans and are more likely to have lots of automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) and low moods.

Potential problems: Depression, addiction, cyclic mood disorders

Brain Type 5 — Cautious: This group tends to struggle more with anxiety, which causes them to be more cautious and reserved. On the flip side, it makes them more prepared.

Potential problems: Anxiety, addictions

Optimize Your Child's Brain

Knowing your child, tween, or teenager's brain type is the key to finding the best lifestyle strategies to optimize their brain so they can go from struggling in school to succeeding or to give them a competitive edge so they can leapfrog from good grades to great grades.

Brain Type 1 — Balanced

What to eat: Stick to a diet that is balanced in high-quality proteins and complex carbohydrates (the low-glycemic, high-fiber kind). This helps balance blood sugar, boosts focus and provides the necessary building blocks for brain health.

Supplements: Multi-vitamins, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D

Exercise: Walk like you're late for 45 minutes, four times a week and lift weights twice a week.

School strategy: Having a Balanced Brain Type doesn't mean it's okay to pile on the AP classes. Don't urge your child take on more than they can handle.

Brain Type 2 — Spontaneous

What to eat: Higher-protein, lower-carbohydrate diets tend to help this type.

Supplements: Green tea, rhodiola, ginseng

Exercise: Cardio can be especially effective for this type. Just let your child pick a heart-pumping activity they love, or they may not stick with it.
School strategy: To help with focus, encourage your student to make a list of goals and look at it first thing every morning.

Brain Type 3 — Persistent

What to eat: Emphasize healthy carbs (such as sweet potatoes and hummus) and foods that boost serotonin — such as salmon, turkey, eggs, nuts, and seeds — because they are calming for this brain. However, avoid high-glycemic carbs like bread and pasta, which quickly increase serotonin — people with this brain type tend to become addicted to them.

Supplements: 5-HTP, saffron

Exercise: Burst training boosts serotonin.

School strategy: These children do better with options not edicts; so don't tell them which classes to take or colleges to apply to; give them choices.

Brain Type 4 — Sensitive

What to eat: Focus on getting healthy fats in the diet, such as avocado, almonds and salmon.

Supplements: Omega-3 fatty acids, s-adenosylmethionine (SAMe), vitamin D

Exercise: Physical activity that includes a social aspect — dancing, tennis or team sports — can be beneficial.

School strategy: Encourage your child to study with a

friend to increase the feel-good neurochemicals the brain releases from social bonding.

Brain Type 5 — Cautious

What to eat: To help reduce anxiety, eat probiotics — yogurt, sauerkraut and kefir — but steer clear of caffeine, refined sugar and alcohol.

Supplements: B6, magnesium, GABA

Exercise: Calming activities like yoga and tai chi can soothe cautious brains.

School strategy: Teach your child to use relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, whenever they have a test. And let them know they don't have to believe every anxious thought that pops into their head — they can kill the ANTs.

Learn more secrets to student brain health success at https://www.changeyourbrainchangeyourgrades.com.

About the Author

Daniel Amen
Clinical Neuroscientist Psychiatrist, Physician, Professor

Daniel Amen, MD, is a clinical neuroscientist psychiatrist, physician, professor and 10-time New York Times

bestselling author. He is a double board-certified child and adult psychiatrist and founder of Amen Clinics, Inc., which has eight clinics across the country with one of the highest published success rates for treating complex psychiatric issues with the world's largest database of functional brain scans relating to behavior, with more than 160,000 scans on patients from 121 countries. Amen is the lead researcher for the largest brain imaging and rehabilitation study for professional football players that demonstrates high levels of brain damage in players with solutions for significant recovery as a result of his extensive work. His research on post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury was recognized by Discovermagazine's Year in Science issue as one of the "100 Top Stories of 2015." Amen has authored and co-authored more than 70 professional articles, seven scientific book chapters and 40-plus books, including the No. 1 New York Times bestsellers, "The Daniel Plan" and "Change Your Brain, Change Your Life." His most recent book, "Change Your Brain, Change Your Grades," includes editorial contributions from his teenage daughter, Chloe Amen, and niece, Alizé Castellanos.