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Six Ways to Help Students Raise Their Grades

FRIDAY, 06 JUNE 2008 16:48 ADMINISTRATOR



By Annie Burnquist
With the school year ending, millions of high-school students are preparing for that last minute push to raise their grades -- and parents are looking for ways to help. Here are six tips to boost your child's final-exam scores.

1) Exercise the body to give the brain a boost.

Physical activity increases blood flow to the brain, feeding it with oxygen and learning-boosting nutrients like glucose. "Exercise in many ways optimizes your brain to learn," says Dr. John Ratey, a Harvard Medical School professor.

Getting students to workout greatly improves their classroom performance. One study found that 15 to 45 minutes of exercise before class reduced fidgeting among children by half. In a study that looked at three groups of students with different physical education routines, the group that exercised the most did the best on tests, even though they spent the least amount of time in class.

2) Create a healthy study space.

Where kids study is almost as important as what they study. So designate a specific spot for studying. Doing so sends the message that your household takes academics seriously. And although the area should be free of distractions like TV, video games, and phones, it should also reflect what the student needs -- not what mom wants. Developing this habit early in life will pay off immensely during college.

Aesthetics matter. One study found that grades were 25 percent better for students who study near a window; natural lighting promotes concentration.

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3) Encourage interactive learning.

An ancient Chinese proverb goes: "Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand." Students perform better when actively engaged with the material. A great way to ensure that engagement is to hire a personal tutor.

Tutors were once too expensive for most Americans. Calculus tutors cost about \$100 per hour -- and an instructor's quality varied with location. That's all changed thanks to online tutoring services. They provide all the benefits of old-fashioned tutoring -- like one-on-one attention, a customized educational experience, and instant feedback -- at a considerably lower price. Kids who use our tutoring service typically raise their grade by at least half a letter.

4) Get plenty of sleep.

Sleep is essential to the brain's ability to learn. Teenagers should get at least eight hours each night. Grade schoolers need at least 10. Late-night cram sessions don't produce much long-lasting knowledge, and they compromise the ability to analyze and recall information during tests.

One study by Harvard psychiatry professor Robert Stickgold found that after learning a new skill, student performance didn't improve until after at least six hours of sleep. "It's as if you have to wait for the dough to rise," he explained.

Psychology professor Pamela Thacher cross-referenced college student grade point averages with sleeping habits and found that "you can't do your best work when you're sleep-deprived. . . If you use all-nighters, your GPA is slightly lower on average."

5) Encourage communal learning.

Group learning is more exciting than thumbing through a textbook. As social psychologists David Brandon and Andrea Hollingshead have concluded, "interaction with others leads to active processing of information by the individual."

Thanks to the internet, kids don't need to confine their study partners to people in their immediate area. There are plenty of high-quality online forums for kids to talk to each other or adult experts. As psychology professor Rena Palloff and international studies professor Keith Pratt noted in a paper on online learning communities, the "keys to the learning process are. . . the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions."

6) Have a study plan.

Creating a study plan is an effective way to manage stress and use time efficiently. A recent study by the American College Health Association rated stress as the #1 impediment to academic performance among college students in the United States. And during finals season, academic anxiety can be especially bad.

Luckily stress can be substantially reduced with just a little bit of planning. By creating a realistic study schedule and breaking down assignments into small, manageable pieces, students can avoid stress leading up to an exam.

Annie Burnquist is the founder and president of ThinkingStorm.com, an online tutoring service.

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