

Beat the Back to

SCHOOL

5 ways to boost your kid's brain power

Call it what you will: the summer slide, brain drain or learning loss—your children's brains can take a vacation over the summer, especially if they slack off on reading. But once it's time to hit those books again, you want your child to get his groove back quickly. *uevolve* picked the formidable brains of Boulder-based integrative pediatrician Roy Steinbock, MD and his wife, holistic nutrition counselor Debbie Steinbock, to come up with six great ways to help boost your family's brain power (warning: your own brain may start to feel a little clearer too).



1. Choose complex over simple

Surprising as it sounds, your brain is the sugar hog that utilizes 20% of the body's carbohydrate supply. Of course, it's a smart hog, knowing that for optimal performance, a nice steady stream of carbs works better than a herky-jerky supply. "Complex carbohydrates stabilize blood sugar levels," says Debbie Steinbock. "The less processed the better, because it means that food is slower to break down and offers more sustained energy." Refined sugars offer a quick fix offset by deleterious consequences: a neurotransmitter imbalance that can result in your child feeling fidgety, irritable, inattentive or sleepy.

Homework: *To combat brain drain, offer smart snacks: whole fruit instead of fruit juice, nuts and seeds as opposed to overly processed bars, cut up vegetables over chips and cheese sticks or plain yogurt rather than heavily sweetened yogurt tubes.*



2. Breakfast like champions

The best school prep? Debbie Steinbock says that nothing beats eating a good breakfast. Countless studies link eating breakfast with improved memory, concentration and learning. Children who don't eat breakfast tend to be more distracted, tired and

BLUES

impulsive than those who begin the day with a solid meal. Ideally, include some kind of protein in their breakfast to fuel the brain and decrease blood sugar fluctuations.

Homework: For an A+ breakfast, combine a complex carb such as oatmeal (not the packet kind) with organic sausages, turkey bacon, eggs or nut butters.

3. Beef up on iron

Surprisingly, iron is a nutrient essential to optimal brain function. While iron deficiencies tend to fall off the radar, says Dr. Roy Steinbock, "I've found that ADHD invariably corresponds to iron deficiencies. Correcting ferritin levels makes a dramatic difference in behavior." A study published in the December 2004 issue of *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*—the first study to connect children's iron levels and ADHD—showed that the majority of 4- to 14-year-old children (84%) with childhood attention deficit hyperactivity disorder had abnormally low ferritin levels. The lower the iron levels, the study suggested, the worse the hyperactivity, oppositional behavior and cognitive scores.

Homework: One of the most interesting aspects of the study is that low ferritin levels don't necessarily indicate anemia. If you suspect your child may suffer from an iron deficiency, discuss with your doctor whether to have a ferritin blood test administered.

4. Honor bedtimes

No matter how tired your child seems, keeping bedtimes consistent counts as a parenting best practice. According to a study of intelligence and sleeping habits in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, irregular bedtimes may disrupt healthy brain development in young children by hampering the brain's plasticity. Going to bed at a different time each night caused children to fare worse on mental tasks than children who had a set bedtime, researchers found. Disrupting your child's typical sleep pattern may have a profound affect on his ability to learn.

Homework: Get disciplined about bedtime and make sure you set it early enough for adequate sleep. If your kid seems too wired to sleep, avoid media and processed foods two hours before bedtime.



5. Play for the win

Studies by University of Illinois researchers suggest a noteworthy relationship between fitness scores and academic achievement among primary school children. In a series of cognitive challenges, fit children routinely scored better. The fittest kids' MRIs showed significantly larger basal ganglia, a key part of the brain that aids in maintaining attention and executive function. Exercise seems to enlarge this part of the brain and enhance neurocognition in young people.

Homework: Encourage your child to get involved in an organized physical activity, school sports or regular family-initiated fitness routines.



Nourish your baby's brain with DHA:

Essential fatty acids are called essential for a reason, says Dr. Steinbock. "They are essential for function, and our bodies cannot make them on their own." Especially in the first year of life, when the brain grows a whopping 175%, DHA supports brain, eye and nervous system development.

Homework: If you are breastfeeding, supplement your own diet with omega-3s, which will then be passed on through your milk. For formula-fed babies, even with formula that contains DHA, Dr. Steinbock recommends adding additional DHA supplements to the formula.