How Emotions Affect Learning
by Brad Epsten, MS Social Work

. Emotions can have enormous affects on learning and help or hinder the development of a child and their success in school. Priscilla Vail, the late teacher and learning specialist described emotion as the "on-off switch to learning". "Anger, pessimism, and fear blow fuses, trip learning circuits," she wrote. "When the switch is off, learning is not possible."

The opposite is true for positive emotions. When we are joyful and hopeful we are more receptive and learning and memory are enhanced. When the switch is on, the pathway to learning is open.

A brief peek into the brain gives us a window into what is happening to cause our brain to work this way. The limbic system is in the middle part of the brain between the cortex and the brainstem. The brainstem sends sensory information to the cortex via the limbic system. Emotions are interpreted in the limbic system of the brain and affect behavior. A great deal of our learning takes place in the cortex and the memory process involves the limbic system.

Because the limbic system is the mediator between thought and feeling, it is easy to see why emotion is so crucial to making good decisions and thinking clearly. Emotions can disrupt thinking and learning. When we are happy, we have a "clear mind", but when we are upset we can't "think straight". Positive emotions such as joy, contentment, acceptance, trust and satisfaction can enhance learning. However, prolonged emotional distress can hamper our ability to learn. We have all experienced the difficulty with mental tasks or remembering something when we are anxious, angry, or depressed.

Emotions control how we interpret life and the resulting actions. These are influenced by the memories we have of our past interpretations. As these memories take hold, they build our beliefs and have a major impact on our emotions. Positive memories can build positive emotions, and therefore lead to a positive attitude toward learning. Conversely, negative memories or interpretations can lead to negative emotions and restrict the ability to learn. For instance, a student might have a history of not completing homework and associated conflicts with their parents and the school. Those memories will affect thoughts and emotions; and can create difficulty with current efforts on homework by thinking thoughts such as “I stink at homework...I’ll never finish...why should I try”.

Another way that emotions affect learning is through motivation. If we have negative emotions or thoughts toward something we will be less likely to put forth effort in that area. Fear of failure, disconnect between effort and results, and negative mental states including depression or anxiety can all lead to poor motivation. This in turn reinforces all of the negative thinking because low effort brings poor results and the pessimistic cycle begins to take over.

Anxiety can also take control over the learning process and limit one’s cognitive ability. Fear can build on itself and interrupt the thinking that is necessary to perform academically. This can take the form of test anxiety, fear of failure, social phobias, or generalized anxiety that leave only partial use of one’s intellectual capabilities.

Typically, children do not have the tools or strategies to break out of the negative cycle that affects their ability to learn. They need intervention from a trusted adult such as a parent, counselor, teacher, or other “safe” person. Rapport and trust need to be built to allow the child to accept help from another person. Sometimes a breakdown has to occur before they are willing to address the issues. Some of the following tips can be useful when assisting a child who is struggling with their emotions and/ or attitudes that may be affecting their learning.

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."
~Anne Frank
Ways To Help Children Manage Their Emotions

Awareness of Emotions: Assist children in identifying their emotions. If they are not aware of them, it will be difficult to take any necessary corrective action.

Managing our Emotions: Once we recognize our emotions we can do a better job of intervening to correct maladaptive behavior that can result from negative emotions. We can implement strategies to gain control of our emotions.

Build in Reasonable Expectations: It is easy for a child to get overwhelmed when the workload seems insurmountable. If tasks are broken down to manageable pieces, success can be built on and foster positive regard.

Play to Child’s Strengths: Nothing builds a child’s confidence and self esteem better than engaging in activities where they are competent. If you are having challenges finding that area, ask around, contact school staff, relatives or friends for assistance.

Develop Social Competence: Many children do not acquire social skills as part of normal development. For some it is a much more rote process that has to be taught using many different modalities. Success in the social world will help with positive regard for oneself and positive emotions and feelings.

Inexpensive Ways to Beat the Winter Blues
The temperature’s not the only thing that drops in winter. For many people, the shorter days and colder weather can bring about a serious dip in mood that stretches into spring. Escaping the cold for a tropical climate certainly sounds good but a beach getaway may not fit into your budget. The good news is, brightening your spirits doesn’t have to cost a lot of money. In fact, improving your mood may be as simple as getting a little more creative with how you spend your time. If the dreary weather has got you down, check out these inexpensive ways to banish the winter blues.

Exercise
Exercising regularly isn’t just good for your physical health, it’s also a great way to give yourself a much-needed emotional boost. When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins which make you feel happier and more relaxed. If you’re having a hard time getting your day started, taking a brisk walk around the block or doing a few minutes of yoga can get your blood flowing and perk up your attitude. Joining a gym can help you stay motivated but there’s still plenty you can do at home if you’re short on cash to beat the winter blues.

Volunteer
Volunteering won’t cost you anything more than a little of your time and a tank of gas, but it can pay off big in terms of emotional and mental rewards. Whether you’re helping out at your local food pantry or walking dogs at the animal shelter, it gives you a chance to occupy your mind with something other than thoughts about how nasty the cold is. Not only that, you could be lifting up someone else who’s seen their mood take a nosedive.

Stay Connected
Keeping in touch with friends and family is one of the easiest ways to climb out of the winter doldrums. If you can’t afford to go out on the town, you can still find ways to get together that won’t cost a lot. Starting a book club, having a regular movie night at a friend’s house or weekly wine tastings at home are all inexpensive options for keeping your support system intact.

If you’re tempted to follow the groundhog’s example and hide out until spring, it’s a sure sign that you need to shake up your routine.

Breaking out of a seasonal slump isn’t always easy, especially when you don’t have a lot of cash to spare. These money-saving ideas can help you beat the winter blues and put you back on the right track.

Take Up a Hobby
If you’ve always wanted to learn to knit or you’ve been thinking of taking a course at the local college, winter is the perfect time to pursue your passions. When the weather’s keeping you indoors, having something to keep your mind and hands busy can make it much easier to while away the hours. Signing up for a pottery class or buying some art supplies won’t break the bank and it’ll give you something to do until the spring flowers begin blooming.

Bring the Outdoors In
Gray skies and blankets of white
February Workshops

SEACOAST
Wednesday, February 8th at 10:00 am
First Parish United Church, Somersworth

CONCORD
Wednesday, February 15th at 11:00 am
(Note time change!)
Friends Conference Room

LAKES REGION
Tuesday, February 21st at 10:30 am
Sacred Heart Parish
31 Gilford Ave Laconia (building behind the Church offices on corner of Union and Gilford)

NASHUA
Tuesday, February 7th at 10:00 AM
St. Philip’s Greek Orthodox Church
500 W. Hollis St., Nashua

MANCHESTER
Wednesday, February 15th at 9:30 AM
Manchester Christian Church
1308 Wellington Rd., Manchester

HAMPSTEAD/DERRY
Thursday, February 23rd at 1:00 PM
Hampstead Library

Nancy Paul, Director of Senior Programs, will attend each workshop for a program information and feedback session.

Anniversaries!

January

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<th>Name</th>
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<td>Patrick Foster</td>
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<td>Jennifer McNab</td>
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<td>Penelope Allen</td>
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<td>Evelyn Schafer</td>
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<td>Noreen Langone</td>
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February

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<td>Brenda Amnott</td>
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<td>Marguerite Morin</td>
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<td>Rita Kimball</td>
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<td>Jean Gilman</td>
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Welcome to our newest volunteer!

Judi Singh ~ Fairgrounds Elementary, Nashua
Benefit Time Balances

We are nearing the end of the Foster Grandparent Program’s fiscal year and are reviewing Benefit Time balances. As you know, balances may not be carried over into the next grant year. For those who have excess Benefit Time remaining, your hours will be paid out in increments over the next four pay periods.

Our new fiscal year begins April 1st at which time all active Foster Grandparents will receive a new allotment of Benefit Time.

Time Sheet Reminder

Please also be advised that we can no longer accept hours over the phone unless it is all benefit time. All time sheets must be signed by both the volunteer and the site, and be submitted by each Friday ending a pay period or Thursday in cases where there is a holiday.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for ensuring the Foster Grandparent Program is meeting its grant requirements.