

GUEST COLUMN

Brain Power: Keeping your mind sharp and healthy



Jessica Wick

By Jessica Wick

Taking care of your brain is more important than ever, and it starts with simple, everyday habits. Keeping your mind active, learning new things and staying curious is vital to maintaining cognitive sharpness. Experts agree that optimizing cognitive abilities, sensory experiences, motor skills, emotional balance and behavior is crucial for overall well-being. A healthy brain plays a significant role in staying focused, managing stress and maintaining strong relationships.

From processing our surroundings to controlling our emotions, the state of our brain impacts every aspect of our lives. Nurturing brain health can enhance mental clarity, improve connections with others and contribute to success in various areas of life.

The Lifespan Perspective on Brain Health

Brain health is essential at every stage of life, from early childhood through old age. Early brain development sets the stage for future health, learning and behavior. For example, the brain's plasticity during childhood allows it to adapt

and learn new skills quickly. Maintaining brain health is essential because it influences our functions, helps mitigate cognitive decline, supports mental agility and promotes independence. Supporting cognitive function from childhood through adulthood is essential for a fulfilling life.

The Importance of Sleep for Brain Health

Sleep isn't just about resting; it's when our brains do some of their most important work. Think of sleep as a reset button — while asleep, our brain is busy organizing memories, processing emotions and even clearing out toxins that can build up during the day. A lack of sleep can lead to decreased focus, diminished problem-solving skills and heightened irritability. For children in particular, consistent and quality sleep plays a role in facilitating learning and regulating emotions.

The Role of Nutrition in Brain Health

What we eat directly impacts how we feel and think, especially for children whose brains are rapidly developing. B vitamins are key players in supporting brain function and growth. If children don't get enough of these vitamins, it can lead to more than just physical symptoms like stomach aches or bad breath. They might also struggle with concentration in school, feel moody or have difficulty remembering things. Small changes, like incorporating foods rich in B vitamins — such as eggs, leafy greens and whole grains — can make a big difference in their ability to focus, learn and thrive.

Building Healthy Brains

Engaging in activities stimulating cognitive and sensory functions, such as learning a new language, regular physical exercise or trying new hobbies, can boost brain resilience and potentially delay neurodegenerative diseases. The brain's ability to change and adapt

is something that should be leveraged throughout our lives. By challenging the brain, we can build resilience and overall health.

Enhancing brain function involves improving sensory processing, motor skills, impulse control, emotional regulation and cognitive abilities. Engaging in a variety of activities can optimize performance in these key areas. Research-backed programs, such as those offered by Brain Balance, utilize these strategies to support brain health:

- **Sensory Domain:** Stimulates sensory processing through exercises that engage sight, sound, touch, smell and body awareness, supporting attention and emotional regulation.
- **Motor Domain:** Improves coordination, balance and posture with activities that integrate sensory and motor skills.
- **Behavioral Domain:** Strengthens impulse control and emotional regulation, promoting a balanced stress response.
- **Social-Emotional Domain:** Enhances connectivity for better stress management, empathy and social interactions.
- **Cognitive Domain:** Boosts attention, memory and problem-solving by

integrating sensory inputs and coordinating brain functions.

Improving brain health goes beyond academic performance or behavior; it's about building a strong foundation for lifelong well-being and supporting growth in all areas of life.

Embracing Your Brain Health

Understanding and optimizing brain health is key to enhancing quality of life at every stage. As research evolves, the focus on brain health will continue to be integral to achieving holistic well-being. It's never too early or too late to start.

Jessica Wick, executive director of Brain Balance Center Jacksonville, was inspired to help families after witnessing the program's transformative impact on her son, Dylan, in 2017. A University of Florida graduate with degrees in anthropology and criminal justice, Wick is also a board-certified cognitive specialist. She's passionate about advocating for Lyme disease and enjoys Florida Gator football. She lives in Nocatee with her husband, Kris, and their two children.

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