



Knowing *How* Your Minds Works is a Key to School Success

All students learn differently. Yet in school, they are often expected to work within a set structure. Unfortunately for some students, this structure may include expectations that don't match with their specific way of learning. Close observation by parents and teachers can often unearth likely breakdown areas. If given the chance, most students can describe what is hard or easy for them in school. For example, students can usually identify whether they have difficulty with aspects of attention, behavior or academic skills (like reading or math). In addition, open discussions with students about their approach to different tasks can also help them choose useful strategies so they can do better in school.

However, students don't tend to consider how they learn (strengths and weaknesses) until they have faced some sort of academic struggle. In fact, there are students who enter high school or college who have never experienced what it feels like to *really* struggle on an assignment. Eventually, when these students are confronted with a task that does not "come easily," they often become frustrated or simply give up because they lack effective strategies.

Metacognition is a key tool for learning. It involves thinking about one's own thinking. Students use their metacognition when they set goals, monitor their work, assess how they are doing and regulate their progress. An essential component of metacognition is the ability to choose specific study strategies to help reach a goal and monitor how well one is doing in the process. When students understand their own learning strengths and weaknesses they are better able to be work through a task independently and use appropriate strategies. Helping students achieve this level of understanding about themselves as learners involves first taking the time to listen to how they describe their everyday school experience.

Students of all ages are capable of describing their learning experiences in school in their own words. For example Seth, an enthusiastic kindergartener, often finds it hard to keep his body still during class. One day Seth was so wiggly he literally kept falling off his chair. When the teacher asked Seth what was going on, he exclaimed, "If I have to sit still in class, my brain falls asleep!" Seth was describing what many kids who have weak mental energy (an aspect of attention) experience. For them, the act of sitting can take more energy than running three miles.

Fifth grader Caroline also has difficulties with aspects of her attention, but her attention difficulties are manifested more in her behavior. Caroline doesn't purposely try to get into trouble, but she needs strategies to "check herself" when she has the urge to act impulsively. "You know how there are students in school that every teacher knows because they are always in trouble or always doing what they aren't supposed to be doing? Well, that's my brain. I can't make my brain behave." The first step Caroline must take is to become more *aware* of the times when she is impulsive. Then, she can begin to learn what she needs to do to advocate for herself during these situations.

For Laura and Trevor reading is difficult in school, but for different reasons. Laura is a very bright and creative 3rd grader who struggles to read words on a page. She can understand complicated text when it is read to her, but when she has to read independently, she gets angry. "Sometimes one word can really make me mad at a story, and I just want to tear up the whole book in shreds." Trevor, an 8th grader, handles his weak comprehension by "skipping a few pages at a time — it makes the book go so much faster."

Yet knowing what is easy or not in school is only half the battle, especially for students like Angie (6th grader). She knows exactly what she needs to do in order to succeed in school, but she gets stuck when it comes to actually *doing the work*. For example, Angie can easily describe what needs to be done for an upcoming long-term project. Angie can outline each element of the project, demonstrating a clear understanding of the topic in detail. However, when she isn't able to hand the project in on time, the teacher questions her about whether she followed the steps she described so eloquently only weeks before. Angie's reply is, "No." When asked to explain why, Angie exclaims, "Because that's the hard part!"

Change takes time. It is important for adults to help students realize that it is normal for some things to be harder in school than others. Students need to know that it's OK to struggle, but it's also important to try to understand why one task or subject is hard for them — so they can do something about it. At first, parents and teachers can encourage students to share their school experience as descriptively as possible, so that helpful strategies can be offered. It can be beneficial to combine students' insights with the perspectives of parents and teachers, as well as to analyze student work samples and whenever possible, observe the student in the classroom environment. But in the end, it is the students themselves who are able to articulate what's going on for them best in school. Ultimately, the more students become aware of their thinking processes, the more they will be able to successfully take control of *what* and *how* they learn.



Leslie Williamson is the Executive Director of the non-profit Center for School Success (CSS) in West Lebanon, NH. CSS services (learning assessments, professional development and community outreach) help teachers, parents, and students understand and manage specific breakdowns in learning, by linking *how* a student learns best with a plan for success. To learn more visit: www.centerforschoolsuccess.org

Strategies That Work

If students are going to learn intentionally, they need to become aware of how their minds are working when they are learning something. The more they are able to describe how they learn best on given tasks, the easier it will be to choose useful strategies.

Parents/Teachers can encourage students to consider the following general metacognitive questions (thinking about one's own thinking) that can be applied to any task:

- Why am I doing this assignment?
- How is it related to what we are learning in class?
- Do I understand all the directions and what I need to do?
- If I don't understand some part of the assignment, what should I do?
- Have I done anything like this assignment before? Was I successful? If so, what did I do?
- What part of this is going to be easy/hard for me? Why?
- How much time will each part of the assignment take me?
- What do I know about myself when I am doing something correctly?
- Did I correctly estimate the time it would take me to do each part of the assignment? If not, was there a reason it took me shorter or longer than I expected?

Once strategies have been identified the following steps will help the student begin to apply them on his/her own:

- Parent/Teacher models the strategy for the student
- Have student perform the strategy with assistance
- Remind the student when the strategy could be used
- Praise the student every time the strategy is used
- Provide practice opportunities to use the strategy
- Encourage the student's self-choice of the strategy
- Help the student master the strategy
- Select a new strategy

(Help for the Struggling Student, Mimi Gold, 2003)