

Introduction:

Smoothies for the Brain

Welcome to the two worlds of brain-based education and behavior management.

This easy-to-use booklet describes *16 Smoothies for the Brain*, research-based, brain-compatible strategies that are effective in smoothing out, defusing, and in some cases, even preventing difficult behavior management problems in the classroom. They are based on neuroscience, psychology, neurophysiology, and education research of the past 30-plus years about how brains function best in the classroom. Each tool is easy to implement in the moment, and can be used with one student or a group, at any school grade level, and without major disruption of classroom routines.

Who this book is for

This ready reference is written for teachers and other adult mentors who are committed to finding ways to reach students whose stubborn and problematic behaviors do not respond to our normal repertoire of behavior management and teaching strategies. These are students whom we *know* can be reached if we can just find the right approach. This book is also for teachers who are self-starters, open to new ideas, and interested in continuing to learn better ways to engage angry, upset, and unhappy students in their classrooms.

And last, this book is for all those students who become disgruntled and unproductive, and especially those who are chronically frustrated by not being able to calm down or de-escalate their own growing anger no matter how many times they try.

Which students need Smoothies

Over the years, as we have worked with hundreds of teachers and students to find effective ways to address behavior problems in the classroom, we have found a sizeable minority of students (up to 20%) who do not respond to our usually effective interventions. What we do works with many, but there are always some students who keep talking,

avoiding or ignoring the lesson and us; being distracted, noisy, disruptive, disrespectful; or failing to complete assignments and perform well on tests, even after we have intervened again and again with a variety of teaching and behavior management strategies. We know they are “good kids,” but without a new and different approach, we worry these students will join the thousands of others who get discouraged or suspended, give up or drop out of school altogether.

How Smoothies can help

Since beginning our work, we have used many special brain-based techniques with a variety of student populations both in our own school and in many others. In this booklet, we share the 16 tools we have found to be most effective. These tools don't require much planning or instruction, special permission to use, or special equipment to buy. All these exercises blend easily into the classroom setting, take five minutes or less to implement, and can be used with one person, a small group, or the full class. Last, they are student-friendly: as students become comfortable with these tools, they can use them to regulate their *own* behaviors.

These strategies or Smoothies specifically target the internal neurological, emotional and sensory systems in the brain, each of which must function well for students to behave productively. By briefly changing the classroom environment, teacher presentation style, or student physiology, these tools improve the student's current brain state. For example, spinning and rocking stimulate the vestibular or balance system of the brain, which not only increases focus and motor and visual capacities, but also can improve basic reading, writing, and other academic skills.

Why other useful behavior management strategies don't always work well

Almost all students behave inappropriately at one time or another. Often the reasons are related to their feeling slighted, provoked, afraid, insecure, bored, tired, or even just hungry (or thirsty)! As we now know, each of these states can be altered by a short break, time to quiet down, a safe place to be, a bit of praise, or a firm and friendly limit by the teacher. These

students are basically pretty stable, but when they do get off track, they need just a little adjustment of input to alter their brain chemistry and redirect their energies.

There is, of course, a minority of students whose brain neurology is more complicated. We may think these students have a negative attitude or poor “native intelligence,” but their problems could have a physiological basis. First, intelligence is not fixed at birth and many learning problems can be ameliorated, even for a lifetime. Even though we know negative attitudes can have an impact on a person's willingness to take risks, students usually act out for reasons that are much more complex than low self-esteem, a lack of willpower, or a bad attitude. Their behaviors are influenced by pronounced brain wiring glitches, including chemical imbalances, poor cognitive and emotional processing problems, and impaired sensory systems. In a sense, these cognitive conditions precede their attitudes and behaviors. They are difficult to detect because they reside hidden in the physiology and can have origins in childhood trauma, poor nutrition and natal care, missed developmental milestones, or genetics. Nevertheless, these conditions can influence behaviors in the classroom every day.

How best to introduce Smoothies to your students

A good portion of these tools may be new to teachers. Some are familiar because we see them used in other kinds of settings (at a learning center or clinic, for example), or they are used by special educational staff during resource-room time, elective periods, or pull out sessions. For example, some strategies, such as stretching and breathing exercises, are used in Physical Education class; or a Physical or Occupational Therapist may use spinning and rocking as part of a one-to-one session. However, though familiar with some exercises, many teachers may not have realized these tools' potential impact when used in the classroom as well. To start off, we suggest that you try each of these exercises yourself before using them with your students. Then, share one or two Smoothies with your class on a given day and let the students know when and how you plan to use each to help them refocus, chill out, and relax. Even though your intention is to intervene with the most difficult students, we suggest you begin with the full group rather than singling out specific individuals. Encourage the students to pick the Smoothies they like best

and to use them on their own when they get stuck in negative behavior patterns.

Some students may not be “ready” for one or more of these tools, so you may need to include a guideline or two for a given tool, e.g., a music break can only be used if it results in a more focused and happier class group.

Some students may feel uncomfortable participating in one or more of these activities (e.g., spinning), or associate a particular exercise with their perception of abnormality (e.g., rocking). To address such feelings, it is important that when you introduce these tools, you explain that while one or more of them might look like something weird, the difference is that each is a slow, controlled movement designed specifically to energize or calm the brain. Smoothies are not the same as unconscious, spasmodic, or repetitive moves characteristic of some developmentally delayed or mentally ill people. You could even talk about famous people who regularly do one of these moves, such as Terry Francona, the coach of the Boston Red Sox, who rocks while sitting in the dugout during ballgames; or Elvis Presley, who rocked and spun to the beat of his music. You could even have the students name their own favorite musical artists who rock and spin.

How this booklet is organized

The rest of this booklet is devoted to sharing each Smoothie in an easy-to-follow format. Each Smoothie begins with a definition, followed by a list of instructions. Next a “Note to the teacher” explains the Smoothie in more depth and outlines ways to deal with any potential problems that might arise. Last, there is a section on “Adding some flavor” which shares ways the Smoothie can be enhanced to add a little pizzazz.

We have used these Smoothies in a wide variety of settings and have watched them work to help us, the teachers we work with, and their students to re-engage in new and positive ways. We know they can help you too.