



# Winning Habits Strengths for School—and Life

**IDEAS AND EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS**

“Am I the best in the world? No.  
The question is: Am I the best I can be?”

Edward James Olmos, actor

## Introduction for students

Doing well in school isn't only about academic "smarts." It's also about habits, like self-control and motivation. These habits—or strengths—help us succeed in school and life.

Like muscles, both academic smarts and good habits can be built through practice.

For twelve years, What Kids Can Do (WKCD) has talked with thousands of middle and high school students about what it takes—and what gets in the way—of doing well in school.

In this short booklet—a **companion to our "Winning Habits" video**—we offer some of the advice students have given us and some of what cognitive scientists have to say.

What you'll find here are but a few of the hundreds of helpful ideas, tips, and exercises available. Our hope is that you will get acquainted with these terms, discuss them, practice some of the ideas, and develop an appetite for more.

We also invite you to check out our website: [www.wkcd.org](http://www.wkcd.org). It's chock full of stories about young people raising their voices, creating new knowledge, and making a difference..

## Topics

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF HOMEWORK

MANAGING STRESS

SELF-CONTROL

MOTIVATION AND CHALLENGE

PERSISTENCE

CURIOSITY AND RESOURCEFULNESS

SELF-CONFIDENCE

# #1 Getting the most out of homework

Some experts say that too much of the homework that schools assign is “busy work.” Rarely is it tailored to individual students, providing specific practice in what each one needs to know and be able to do at that point. Schools can do a lot to make homework less boring and more productive.

Still, it’s your job to get the most out of homework, even when it’s a heavy burden.

## **When it comes to homework, it helps to communicate with your teacher**

- Let the teacher know you want to do well
- Ask questions if the assignment is unclear
- Tell the teacher how long a homework task took
- Tell the teacher what was difficult about a homework task
- Tell the teacher when personal circumstances affect homework completion

## **Homework takes organization**

- Keep a “homework notebook” with all assignments and deadlines
- Make a quiet space and time for homework
- Gather materials needed for the homework task
- Get completed homework back to school

## **Homework also requires focus and persistence.**

- Commit to getting the homework done
- Give up distractions during homework time
- Problem-solve what gets in the way
- Do first the homework you dislike
- Get up and take a short break when frustrated

## **Homework demands time management.**

- Prioritize homework tasks by importance and deadline
- Set reasonable time limits for homework
- Balance homework with chores, athletics, and family commitments

# #2 Managing stress

We experience stress when we perceive a situation as dangerous, difficult, or painful and we do not have the resources to cope. Our minds and bodies gear up to “fight” or “flee”: our heart and breathing speed up, more blood flows to the muscles in our arms and legs. In short bursts, this chemical reaction can be helpful, even save our lives. Yet over time, it drains the body and can leave us on edge, tired, angry, or depressed.

*According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:*

## **Stress may be causing a serious problem if a young person . . .**

- Has lost interest in things he or she once enjoyed
- Doesn't sleep or eat well
- Wants to be alone and avoids friends and family
- Daydreams and doesn't want to do things
- Experiences a sudden drop off in their grades
- Grieves for an abnormally long time after a death
- Feels guilty or not worth anything
- Shows extreme anger and/or sadness and overreacts to many things
- Worries constantly about appearance and/or physical problems
- Gets frequent headaches and stomachaches
- Cannot make decisions and or concentrate well
- Turns to drugs or alcohol
- Eats (or diets) way too much
- Exercises obsessively
- Takes extreme risks

## **What raises stress in kids?**

- School demands and frustrations
- Negative feelings and thoughts about themselves
- Changes in their bodies
- Problems with friends or peers at school
- Problems in the family or chronic illness
- Financial strains
- Unsafe living environment or neighborhood
- Death of a family member, relative, or close friend
- Moving or changing schools
- Taking on too much or having too high expectations

The same switch that turns on the stress response can also turn it off. As soon as we decide that a situation is no longer threatening, changes occur in our minds and bodies to calm us.

### These strategies help reduce stress

- ✓ Exercise and eat regularly
- ✓ Avoid excess caffeine (and soda with caffeine), illegal drugs, alcohol, tobacco
- ✓ Learn relaxation exercises (such as mindfulness and abdominal breathing)
- ✓ Build a circle of friends who can provide positive support
- ✓ Rehearse situations that cause stress and practice positive responses
- ✓ Break a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks
- ✓ Turn negative “self-talk” into positive. Negative: “I can’t do this.” Positive: “I’ll do the best I can.”
- ✓ Learn to feel okay about doing a “good enough” job—don’t insist on perfection, from yourself or others
- ✓ Take a stress break! Listen to music, talk to a friend, read, stretch

### ABDOMINAL BREATHING

**Step 1:** Straighten the front of the body. You may sit up, or lie down facing up. Relax any tension that you may feel at the moment: belly, shoulders, jaw, and face.

**Step 2:** Bring the awareness to your breath and notice if you are naturally breathing into your belly, or your chest, or both. Don't control it. Just observe.

**Step 3:** Deliberately draw the air into the bottom of your lungs on the inhale. Let the abdomen expand and extend out. Then, on the exhale, let the abdominal pressure release and, with minimal effort, **slowly** pull the belly in. The chest remains still the whole time. You may place your hand on the belly to feel the rhythmic movement of the abdomen.

Practice the abdominal breath as often as you like, whenever and wherever you like. Try it in a stressful situation. In just a few abdominal breaths, you'll feel a significant difference.

### MINDFULNESS

One of the ways we complicate our lives is by a lack of “mindfulness,” not being in the moment. Our minds are always racing ahead or looking back--or doing things the same way we always have so that our minds are somewhere else. A few minutes of mindfulness can refresh your sense of yourself and your world. Try some of these ideas--or make up your own.

- When putting on your shoes, try and put on the one you usually put on second first. Or if you're used to sugar in your coffee, try drinking it without sugar--or the other way around. Become aware of patterns and how hard it is to break them. (The point is NOT to change the pattern. A new pattern is just as much a pattern as the old one. The idea is to create a bit more flexibility.)
- Take a deep breath: notice five things you can see. Take another breath: notice five things you can hear. Take a final deep breath: notice five things you can feel (e.g., shoes, pants, bracelet).

# #3 Self-control

Managing anger is an important part of self-control. Angry people need to learn to stop themselves before they harm themselves or others. Just as important is being able to put off an immediate reward in order to gain a better reward later. Experts call this “delayed gratification.” Self-control also involves self-awareness: the ability to notice what you're feeling and thinking, and why.

Learning self-control often grows out of conflict. When the conflict is with a parent or teacher, we like to imagine a bargain that goes like this:

IF YOU WILL . . .	THEN WE WILL . . .
[Gently] help us see the merits of resisting the temptation of immediate rewards	Work on developing patience and willpower
Help us cool down when we're angry	Practice strategies for keeping our anger in check
Give us a chance to explain our thinking	Think through our choices more carefully
Help us take risks by trying exciting new things	Stay away from risks that would get us into trouble
Hear us out respectfully when we have trouble with your rules	Accept your right to set limits on our behavior
Respect our choices when they only involve our personal taste	Respect your rules when they involve our health and safety
Give us a second chance when we mess up	Try again to live up to your trust
Look for common ground when we disagree	Look for a compromise we can both live with
Focus on the positive, not what we do wrong	Appreciate how much you care about us

# #4 Motivation and challenge

Cognitive scientists have found that we feel motivated when we value what we're trying to learn and we believe we can succeed if we try. That combination is what makes all of us want to start something and want to keep at it when it gets hard.

## **An Exercise**

*Pick something you enjoy doing and want to get better at. Think about what makes you interested. Check all the boxes that apply.*

### **It looks like fun**

- It seems like something you can probably do
- It involves people you want to be with
- Success doesn't all depend on you
- No one will be judging you, so the stakes are low

### **The activity has an audience that matters to you**

- At school or work
- Among friends or family
- In a public place

### **You have a personal interest in getting good at it**

- To express yourself
- To grow into who you want to be
- To feel the pleasure of mastering new challenges

Is there someone you know, a mentor or teacher, that will be able to support and encourage you—to break things into small steps, do it with you, praise your successes and show you how to do better?

- I will need help finding a mentor/teacher
- I know someone who could be a mentor/teacher, but I don't know if they are willing
- I'm set

How would you rate your confidence that if you practice hard, you'll succeed at the activity you named? Pick a number from 1 to 5, with 1 "not at all confident" and 5 "fully confident." \_\_\_\_\_

# #5 Persistence

Persistence means that you keep going, even when it's hard and you feel like quitting. Completing a long and tough project for school. Becoming better at a favorite sport or musical instrument. Learning how to cool down when you feel like exploding. Sticking with a challenge when it's a stretch to meet it. Progress in these areas often means a half step backward for every step forward. It takes persistence.

Practice is part of persistence. No one likes doing the same thing over and over again until you get it right. But if you practice with a clear goal, with focus, and with encouraging feedback, you'll see results. Remember, too, that making mistakes is an important part of learning.

## FORMING THE PERSISTENCE HABIT

- **Measure yourself.** Figure out how long you can work effectively. Measure how long it takes before you slow down or give up.
- **Do an extra 20 percent.** When you feel like quitting, go an extra 20 percent. If you've been working hard for an hour and a half and want to stop, try another 30 minutes before taking a break.
- **Run a burnout day.** Try working longer for one day, following it with a shorter day. By stretching your focus for longer periods once in a while, you can boost your persistence for normal days.

## FORMING THE FOCUS HABIT

- **Timebox.** Give yourself 60 minutes to work on a particular task, without resting or engaging in any distractions.
- **Accelerate.** It can take anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes to build up a concentrated focus. Give yourself time to accelerate into a focused state.
- **Cut distractions.** Practice the habit of turning off all outside noise: phones, television, chatting with family or friends.

## FORMING THE 'DO IT NOW' HABIT

- **Do it now for 30 days.** For the next 30 days, define periods of your day you want to devote to work or personal projects. During those times, remind yourself to "do it now" whenever you feel the urge to procrastinate.

Source: [www.lifehack.org](http://www.lifehack.org)



# #6 Curiosity and resourcefulness

We are born curious and we are meant to stay that way. Some experts say that curiosity is even more important than intelligence, when it is combined with motivation to learn. Resourcefulness goes hand in hand with curiosity. Resourceful people deal well with new or difficult situations. They can find information on their own and make do with what they have.

## **Tips for developing curiosity**

### **Keep an open mind**

Be open to learning, unlearning, and relearning. Don't take things for granted.

### **Ask lots of questions**

*What, why, when, who, where, and how? Curious people use these words all the time.*

### **Forget "boring"**

When you label something "boring," you close the door on learning more about it.

### **See learning as fun**

If you think of learning as something fun, you will naturally want to dig deeper.

### **Dip your toe in other worlds**

Head to a neighborhood where the people, food, and street life are different. Read a book about growing up in another country. Watch television programs like National Geographic.

## **Tips for developing resourcefulness**

### **Master everyday skills**

For kids who often take a parent's place, knowing everyday skills comes with the territory. For kids who don't carry this burden, it still pays to master everyday chores like doing laundry, cleaning, grocery shopping, paying bills. There's nothing like self reliance.

### **Practice gathering information**

Many kids are experts in Facebook and YouTube, but far fewer know which Internet sources to trust for reliable information. Educate yourself! Begin by going online and entering, "best Internet search tips."

### **Practice problem-solving**

- ✓ Is there another way to get what I want?
- ✓ Is the desired result really the best result?
- ✓ Who has information that might help me?
- ✓ What is one more thing I can try?

# #7 Self-confidence

Think about a time when you accomplished something that was hard for you or when you had a new insight about yourself that helped you feel more focused or capable. Describe it to a friend. Invite them to share a moment of their own that stands out.

Here are two stories students we know shared with us.

*At my school they have a module class called "Sixteen." [For the final project] you have to make a documentary about what it means to be 16. I had to view things from an anthropologist's view, which would be viewing things without bias, without whatever, and I had to go to people, ask them questions. You know, some people are different, some 16-year-olds are different from others. I put that all together in one documentary.*

*And then I noticed that I found a way that I can express myself through film. And that's when I was like, "You know, that's something I wanna do." And then I'm like, "There's so much . . . there's so much you can do with this." So I was like, "I'ma go all the way." I interviewed people from my school, other schools. I put it together and it came out decent, I would say. And I made it look, you know, like a documentary. Like I had documentary music and everything. It was unique. From there, I just started liking film. I go to one of my teachers' classes almost every day, I get a laptop, and I edit and make little films. Sometimes it probably annoys her, but I keep comin' back, comin' back, you know, just to show the interest. - **Raushon***

*I am in a dance group. So I've been there for 3 years. It's actually really fun and I've been dancing a lot. We had a show April 30<sup>th</sup> of this year. It was really nerve wracking. Cause it was like 1000 people. But I wasn't the only one. There was like 20 people in my group and I danced 9 out of 20 dances. There were a lot of emotions happening. Happiness, sadness. Nerves. I was so scared because I had to wear some heel and the floor was really slippery. I was scared that I might slide and twist my ankle or something. I thought, my God I hope nothing happens. But it was really good and It was fun. I don't think I would have ever done that in Colombia.*

*A thousand people! While I was onstage, I actually wasn't nervous. Off-stage, before starting, I was so nervous. I was shaking. Oh, my God I hope I do great. Smile the whole time. And I did. I was so happy. I can't believe I did that! - **Daniela***