

Effective skill building requires time and discipline

Research shows that learning new skills in the most efficient manner requires self-discipline and practice. That seems like common sense to most of us. Science is confirming that, yes, to get better you've got to make yourself sit at the piano and play those tunes and do those finger exercises. Every day.

Effective learning or skill building occurs when we can maximize these factors:

- We have the ability to focus our attention on the task at hand.
- We have control over the choice of the task.
- The task is meaningful to us and we understand how to do it.
- We have adequate time to practice the task, which research shows to be 60 to 90 minutes per day.
- We control feedback, which is accurate and timely.
- We have the opportunity to repeat the task daily or many times per week.
- We have overnight rest between practice sessions.

Ability to focus. Learning to focus can be difficult with the distractions of everyday life. There may always be something more interesting than what someone else wants us to learn, which makes the next point critical.

Choice of the task. When we feel that we have control over what tasks we do and when we do them, we tend to learn more quickly. If we know we do better with math early in the morning when we are fresh, we'll learn more quickly if we can make the choice to do math in the morning.



Meaningful tasks. Haven't we all taken a class and wondered, "When will I ever need to know this stuff?" We learn more quickly when tasks connect to our everyday life and we understand how to do the task. Do you remember the first time you cracked an egg? Having a clear vision of how to perform the task helped. Meaningful? Doing it right meant the difference between scrambled and sunny side up, or in the dish versus on the floor.

Adequate time. Research shows that children will stay on a learning task for 60 to 90 minutes if the

task is meaningful, if the individual child has choice about the task, and if the child is interested in the task. When these conditions are present for learning and the meaningful, chosen, and interesting task is interrupted because of time constraints, learning goes down the tubes and self-motivation takes a nosedive.

Learner controlled feedback. We learn best when we get accurate feedback about our progress when we desire it. Self-correcting materials are ideal learning aids. Having the correct answers available immediately aids learning. Ever try



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to work a thousand piece puzzle without looking at the picture? It's probably ten times easier to put it together with a picture because you get the timely and accurate feedback needed to figure out the puzzle.

Daily repetition. People who excel in an area know that they need to be involved in meaningful tasks everyday to grow and maintain skills and knowledge. We need to make sure we allow the time every day to take on the challenge of learning.

Overnight rest. As many college graduates will confess, you can't cram a semester's worth of learning into a one-day event. Study an hour a day for twelve days and you'll learn more Anatomy 304 than twelve hours in one day. Daily repetition and overnight rest is one reason schools and businesses run on a five-day a week schedule. It helps people learn and grow.

Understand and use these seven points to aid effective learning in your children's and your personal development.

Kids Talk™ is an award-winning column dealing with childhood development issues written by Maren Stark Schmidt, M.Ed. She has more than 25 years experience working with young children and is the author of Understanding Montessori: A Guide for Parents. Contact her via e-mail at maren@kidstalknews.