

Many of the parents I work with ask about ADHD and the brain, and how ADHD affects student performance in school. This is the second of a two part series that provides an overview and resources for parents. To read Part I, go to: [“5 Things Every Parent Needs to Know About ADHD and School - Part I”](#).

Part I describes how:

ADHD is a problem with focus; and

A Problem with Focus is not Necessarily ADHD

You can read Part II below.

### 3. ADHD and the Brain

“Brainwaves” are a way of describing the electrical activity in your brain, and each type of brainwave has certain characteristics.

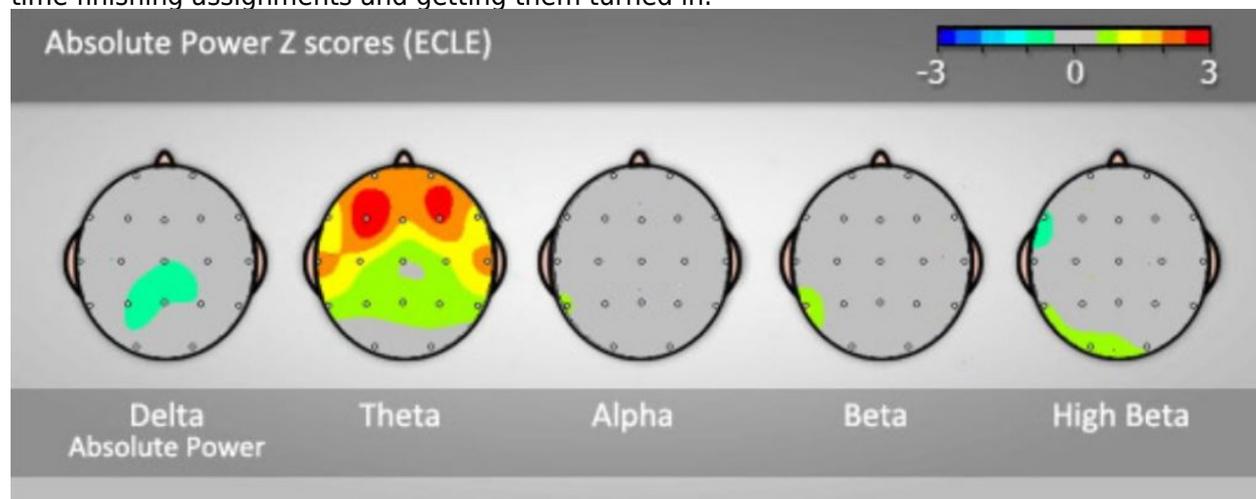
*Theta* waves are associated with meditation, hypnosis, and a spacey-dreamy feeling. If you are in a “theta state,” then your awareness is diffuse. You might notice a pencil dropping in the hallway, or a bird flying by outside the window.

A *theta* state is useful when it helps you process and integrate new information. This is what your brain does during “downtime”.

**But when you’re in a math class or writing the first draft of your English essay, too much *theta* causes trouble.**

Take a look at the map below of ADHD and the brain, from a student with ADHD.

The brighter the color (orange and red), the more *theta* this student has in the front of their brain. Here is a student who is easily distracted, and has a hard time paying attention in class. He also has a hard time finishing assignments and getting them turned in.



Back to the brainwave map: look at the pattern for “beta”, which is a fast brainwave that helps you get things done. In this image, there’s just a tiny bit of green showing. This student has hardly any *beta*. But *beta* is what you need for history, reading, writing, and other kinds of focused work. It helps you block out distractions and get things done. People with ADHD have a brainwave imbalance. Usually they have too much *theta*, too little *beta*, or both. One of the most effective and remarkable ways to shift this balance is with Neurofeedback.

If you’d like to learn more about ADHD and the brain, get a copy of Dr. Paul Swingle’s, “Biofeedback for the Brain,” and read Chapter 5: The Case of ADHD.

But neurofeedback isn't the only way to help the brain learn to focus. We'll look at another approach below, but first let's take a look at why...

#### 4. Rewards and Punishments Don't Work

ADHD and the brain changes how rewards and punishments are processed. Most kids with ADHD don't respond to them at all. I could have offered my kids a trip to Disneyland tomorrow, and it wouldn't have motivated them to pick up their room or finish 10 minutes of math in less than 2 hours.

**I think there are two reasons for this:**



1. Students have a hard time imagining themselves in the future, so the rewards don't seem "real" to them.
  2. Students with ADHD have a hard time focusing. So why reward them for doing something they can't actually do?
- You don't "motivate" a vision-impaired child with rewards. You don't encourage dyslexic students to read by threatening a time-out. Kids can only do what they can do. If they can focus for 3 minutes, notice that and build from there.

**But here's the good news:**

#### 5. You Can Train Your Brain to Focus [Here's How]

**Every student can learn to focus.**

It's a skill.

What they need is a program designed to systematically build stamina. Think of it as an athletic endeavor.

Athletes need a good coach. Coaches provide good practice environment, create a structure for the practice, and help the athletes build endurance.

You can find an Academic Coach, but you might also be able to coach your own student. Here's how:

### **A 3-Step Plan to Improve Focus**

**1. Create a good practice environment.** A good environment is distraction-free, with homework tools (books, pencils, computer) nearby.

**2. Create a structure to the practice.** Block out specific times each day for homework, and make those times as consistent as possible. Create a simple [Homework Setup Routine](#) to help your student get started. Make all your decisions up front about when you will start and what you will do first, and then stick to those decisions. If you decide to start at 4:30 pm, with Spanish vocabulary practice, then do that first. You can make a different decision tomorrow.

**3. Build endurance.** Some students need to start with just 5 minutes of focus, and then take a 5-minute break. Set a timer, do the homework, and build up from there. In high school, you're aiming for periods of about 25 minutes with 5-minute breaks. In college, you'll probably find periods of 50 minutes (with a 10-minute break) more productive.

[Some students will also benefit from a coach.](#) Just as a swim coach can help create structure, encouragement, and motivation as part of a regular swimming practice, an Academic Coach can do the same for helping students build their focus "muscle".

Most students will make huge improvements in focus by regularly and systematically training their brains to do it. It probably won't happen overnight. After all, it takes years to become a great high jumper or tennis player. But with ADHD and the brain, every practice counts.