

# LEARNING FITNESS INSTRUCTOR OLIVIA RAWLINS ROCKLIN CITIZEN ACADEMIES



## *Key Functions*



Works with learners, families, and educators to build and strengthen learners' cognitive, emotional, and social capacities in support of learning



Uses simulations, biofeedback, mindfulness techniques, software-based games, and hands-on activities to help learners reduce stress and develop their “cognitive muscles”



Conducts formal learning fitness inventories at regular intervals to assess changes in learners' cognitive readiness



Works in diverse learning settings, including schools, home-based learning programs, community learning centers, and public youth programs, offering individual and group training sessions and prescribing learning fitness plans



Focuses on teaching learners of all kinds, and their parents and learning agents, how to detect – and mitigate the potential impacts of – stressors and distractions that get in the way of learning

## **My Job and My Work**

When I walk into a classroom, a studio, or a learning fitness session, I tell learners, “I’m Coach Rawlins, I’m here to get your brains in shape.” I educate them about the brain, how it develops, how it works when it’s thinking in different ways, and how it gets tired or distracted based on what you’re doing. It’s amazing how their behavior changes once they are aware of how they can support greater levels of brain performance. Their responsibility for learning changes too, a bit like kids who take responsibility for their health when they learn the basics of nutrition and exercise. I give them the knowledge and tools so that they can manage their own brain health and brain performance. It’s quite empowering. I work directly with learners in learning centers, academies, and youth learning hubs. I also have a private practice and work one-on-one with learning agents, families, and learners.

Right now I’m rotating across four citizen learning academies—two that support early learners and two that support pre-teens and teens—working with specific groups of learners and learning agents. The adults who work at the learning academies now realize that the kids aren’t the only ones who could benefit from some brain fitness and from a better understanding of cognitive performance.

## How My Work Impacts the Rest of the Learning System

Just because kids show up for their learning experiences doesn't mean they're fully prepared to learn. If you were a serious athlete, you'd change your diet, have a stretching regimen, do different kinds of workouts; you might meditate; and you'd watch your sleep. If you were really committed to being the best learner you could be, or to developing the best learners possible, you'd pay attention to conditioning the brain and body. This is about creating a smart learning lifestyle.

## My Biggest Challenges and Rewards

There are some big challenges around how we judge performance if some kids have access to learning fitness instruction and others do not. And of course there are issues of trust. There are the reputable professionals in this field and then there are the "marketeers" who just want to make a dollar and who tend to exaggerate claims of certain kinds of supplements or technologies.

I don't depend on technology as much as some other learning fitness instructors, or cognitive consultants, as some of them call themselves. I focus mostly on what people can do for themselves by becoming more informed and by taking brain fitness into their own hands. Others work with neuro-enhancement technologies such as learning supplements, brainwave analysis, and maps of cognitive pathways to develop personalized approaches to boosting learning.

The pressure to do well in some learning experiences and communities is so high that people will do whatever they think will give them an edge. I find kids taking off-label learning drugs, maybe even getting them from their parents, without really knowing how they will interact with their own body chemistry. Or they want expensive brain-wave mapping done when they don't really need it. I've had private clients leave me because I don't prescribe supplements. Don't get me wrong, these techniques can be effective, but they can minimize how individuals can develop their own practices to improve their learning. And of course there are the equity issues—who's got access to all this stuff?

Sometimes kids are afraid that they're "dumb" and think that working with me will show how their brains are deficient in some way. Games can help. Sometimes the shy kids turn out to be very focused and cognitively healthy, and they're suddenly the kids that everyone wants on their team for simulations and brain games. This kind of thing shows how we didn't used to look at cognitive fitness as a legitimate learning issue, and a lot of learners who may have otherwise excelled were held back because their brains just weren't in shape.

## My Most Important Tools

I use some biofeedback tools and software games that can show kids the difference in their performance when they become more skilled at focusing, suppressing distraction, and regulating their emotions. Also there are some great mobile apps that kids can do on the bus, at home, wherever they are. The apps are fun and are great for training kids on focus, attention, and creativity.

## Proudest Accomplishments

This one student, Corey, was very popular but she had trouble getting her work done and focusing. It wasn't a lack of IQ or even of interest; she just had poor cognitive fitness: her sleep routine was horrible, and she was a worrier who let her emotions take over her thinking. She'd get frustrated and give up. It affected her memory and reasoning. I worked with her to help her realize what was getting in her way. We boosted her cognitive fitness scores a bit, and, once she started to see improvement and get a bit of confidence, she just blossomed. But because she was so popular, she had a viral effect on the whole coolness factor of brain fitness in her social network. Her circle of friends soon had language like "Calm the brain," "Don't waste cognitive energy," and "When we take on a challenge we grow, not fail." That group of kids just took off.