



Connect with Kids

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Health and Wellness: Exercise Can Improve Grades

Video Overview

There is a connection between physical activity and learning and it is a positive one - children who are more physically fit do better academically. They concentrate better in the classroom [and] they perform better on math and reading examinations.

- Dr. David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General

In an effort to boost test performance, many schools are taking time away from physical education and using it for more time in class.

But studies now show that rigorous physical activity can actually lead to better grades.

In Broward County, Florida, many schools are getting the message.

Fourth grade teacher Katherine Bennett takes her students out for a five-minute walk after a long lesson.

“I found that when my children start yawning and they start not paying attention, then one way I can refocus those children is to take them out for a brief, little fun walk,” she says. “And by the time we’ve got them back into the room again, they’re ready to study some more.”

In fact, according to new research from the Medical College of Georgia, kids who are active and play hard have higher levels of concentration, better organization skills and are less impulsive than kids who are sedentary.

“The area of the brain that’s involved in cognitive learning is the same area that’s stimulated by physical activity, so the two seem to work hand in hand,” explains Jackie Lund, Ph.D, President of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

Former U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher agrees, “Children who are physically fit do better academically. They perform better on standardized examinations, they concentrate better, on the other hand, children who are obese are four times as likely to be depressed, very likely to be absent from school.”

What's more, many kids say it's easy to get distracted if you have to sit still, all day long, in school.

"After a while I just get antsy and I want to move around - cause I start to get stiff and it's like, I want to get up and walk around," complains 18-year-old Eric DeGreeff. "But in class you can't really get up and walk around,"

That's why, experts say, if your child's school does not provide vigorous physical education, you have to speak up.

"If parents go out and demand quality physical education, where their kids are learning and they're moving and they're involved in activities that are going to create the next steps for a life time, then they will be heard," says Lund.

Smart Exercise

"It is helpful to think of the brain as a muscle," Dr. John Ratey told colleagues at a conference on "Learning and the Brain" in Boston. Dr. Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says the best way to "maximize the brain" is through exercise and movement. Emerging new research on animals and humans suggests his theory may be correct. In particular, the following two studies indicate that physical exercise may boost brain function, improve mood and increase learning:

- A four-year study at Albion College in Michigan shows that children who participated in regular exercise (jumping rope, hopscotch, catching and throwing balls) significantly raised their scores on standardized mathematics tests. Teachers also reported that the exercise program helped improve the students' social and emotional skills.
- Investigators from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute have found that running boosts the growth of nerve cells and improves learning and memory in adult mice. According to the study, the brains of mice that exercised had about 2.5 times more new nerve cells than sedentary mice.
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Says Dr. Ratey: "Twelve minutes of exercise at 85% of your maximum heart rate is like taking a little bit of Prozac and a little bit of Ritalin in a very holistic manner."

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) offers the following statistics and recommendations to support that physically active children "learn better":

- Elementary school students should participate in a minimum of 60 minutes of moderate and vigorous activity every day.
- Middle and high school students should participate in 30 minutes of physical activity daily.
- Play is an essential part of children's social development.
- Children learn how to cooperate, compete constructively, assume leader/follower roles and resolve conflicts by interacting in play.
- Only 25% of American children participate in any type of daily physical activity.
- More than 300,000 deaths are caused annually by a lack of exercise and a poor diet.

How much exercise does your child need? According to the American Heart Association (AHA), a “healthy level” of physical activity requires regular participation in activities that increase heart rates above resting levels. An active child plays sports, participates in physical education classes, performs regular household chores, spends recreational time outdoors and regularly travels by foot or bicycle.

The AHA offers the following guidelines for maintaining healthy physical activity in children:

- Encourage regular walking, bicycling, outdoor play, the use of playgrounds and gymnasiums and interaction with other children.
- Allow no more than two hours per day to watch television or videotapes.
- Promote weekly participation in age-appropriate organized sports, lessons, clubs or sandlot games.
- Have your child participate in daily school or day-care physical education that includes at least 20 minutes of coordinated large-muscle exercise.
- Make sure your child has access to school buildings and community facilities that enable safe participation in physical activities.
- Provide opportunities for physical activities that are fun, increase confidence and involve friends and peers.
- Organize regular family outings that involve walking, cycling, swimming or other recreational activities.
- Engage in positive role modeling for a physically active lifestyle.

Experts say it is important for parents to remember that physical activity doesn't have to be strenuous to be beneficial.

Resources

- American Heart Association
- Howard Hughes Medical Institute
- Medical College of Georgia
- National Association for Sport and Physical Education