

Youth Fitness: Exercise Helps Children Excel in School

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In an effort to improve performance on achievement tests, recent federal mandates have led school districts to revise their curricula to increase emphasis on language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. These changes have reduced instruction time on non-academic subject matters, such as physical education, arts, and music, decreasing the amount of physical activity children are exposed to during school hours. Today, less than half of youth aged 6 - 17 years meet the recommended guidelines of at least one hour of physical activity each day (CDC, 2008). Physical activity facilitates a child's cognitive development and academic success, and can be achieved in a variety of ways before, during and after school.

Physical Activity Fosters Academic Achievement

Physical activity promotes positive mental health, builds strong bones and muscles, and reduces the likelihood of developing risk factors for obesity and chronic disease. Physical activity also affects a child's academic achievement, helping to improve concentration, memory and classroom behavior. Compared to those who spend less time in physical education classes, children who meet the guidelines for physical activity have higher test scores in both math and reading (CDC, 2008). One [study](#) also found a positive relationship between aerobic fitness, learning, and memory in a group of fourth grade children, suggesting that reducing physical education in schools may actually hinder academic performance for developing children. Even acute bouts of moderate intensity aerobic exercise, during recess breaks or activity-based learning, can improve a child's cognitive performance, according to another [study](#).

Exercise Recommendations for Adolescents

Encouraging children to be active is essential for proper growth and development. However, it is important to recommend activities that are safe and appropriate for their abilities. Most of a child's physical activity should be moderate to vigorous intensity aerobic activity, like bike riding, running, dancing or playing active games and sports. Younger children tend to prefer short bursts of activity with brief rest periods, while older adolescents can participate in longer durations of more structured activities. Play activities and sports that include hopping, skipping, and jumping will help children of all ages develop strong bones. To help strengthen their muscles, younger children enjoy active play, such as gymnastics or playing on a jungle gym. Older adolescents are better equipped for weight-bearing activities that include bodyweight exercises like push-ups, pull-ups, mountain climbers, or burpees.

Inspire Physical Activity in Your Home and Community

One way to ensure your child is getting enough physical activity is to lead by example, modeling an active lifestyle that is part of the family's daily routine. Make physical activity apart of time spent together as a family, taking advantage of public parks, baseball fields and basketball courts in your community. Make sure your child has access to recreational equipment, like a bike, basketball, jump rope or kite, and keep an eye out for upcoming events through your child's school, church or community center that promote physical activity. Instead of playing video games, encourage your child to play with their friends and team up with other parents in your neighborhood to provide a safe environment for activity-based birthdays or holiday celebrations.

The most thorough approach to improving a child's health involves home, school, and community intervention. According to a report from [The National Academies Institute of Medicine \(2013\)](#), "physical education in school is the only sure way for children to access health-enhancing physical activity and the only school subject area that provides education to ensure that students develop knowledge, skill, and motivation to engage in health-enhancing physical activity for life." Parent-teacher associations can further mobilize these ideas by advocating for strong physical education and recess policies, academic lessons that include physical activity, shared-use agreements to allow school facilities to be used for physical activity during non-school hours and child involvement in intramural sports and activity clubs.

Sarah Dalton is the founder of Able Mind Able Body, a Las Vegas based company offering motivational lifestyle coaching and personal training services. She takes a holistic approach to healthy living, and educates others on the benefits of nutrition, exercise, and emotional health. Visit www.ablemindablebody.com for more info.