



FIRST PERSON

Learning in Motion: Bring Movement Back to the Classroom

By Marwa Abdelbary

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With a new school year beginning, many students are expected to rapidly transition from months full of activity and movement to a classroom that relies—primarily—on stasis. This can be a problem, especially when considering that the persistent demand for teachers to do more with their students has, unfortunately, pushed schools into thinking that movement and free play are just wasted time. [← Back to Story](#)

But studies show that children who are more active exhibit better focus, faster cognitive processing, and more successful memory retention than kids who spend the day sitting still. Keeping the body active **promotes mental clarity** by increasing blood flow to the brain, making activity vital to both learning and physical and neurological health.

The problem is that there aren't enough hands. Many educators know how important movement is, but don't have the classroom support to safely handle active children throughout the day.

Fortunately, teachers can take advantage of several opportunities to keep children active during the school day—without needing additional help to keep things under control.

Why Sitting Shouldn't Be the Standard

Sitting still and being quiet have always been schoolhouse rules. In recent years, the mantra has gained more steam with worries that today's children lack focus or aren't grounded enough in what has been dubbed an age of distraction. A **2011 study by researchers at Duke University** found that a student's capacity to concentrate is one of the best predictors of success. The researchers studied more than 1,000 children in New Zealand over a period of eight years to track their ability to pay attention, then followed up with them as adults to measure their health and financial stability. Those with more self-control were less likely to have difficulty with money or health problems.

Given the endless media streams from devices like smartphones, iPads, and iPods, it's no surprise that children today seem less focused than kids 30 years ago. But tying them down is not the solution. Over the past few decades, the time schools have dedicated to **physical education and recess has steadily decreased**. Yet experts agree that children need **at least 60 minutes** of physical activity each day. With this in mind, savvy teachers are increasingly making physical activity an important part of their lesson plans.

Play and movement give kids the chance to release stress and take breaks from the rigor of schoolwork. While it's important for children to learn how to work while sitting still, we also need to realize when our bodies are telling us to take a break—even as adults.

I learned the necessity of movement for myself in my college years. I retained a lot from sitting and focusing for two hours, but gained much less if forced to sit for five hours at a stretch. This knowledge has translated to my own work as a school-based physical therapist. I now help children and adolescents (and their parents) access specific strategies that can lead them to a more productive lifestyle.

Making Time for Activity

Discipline and order in classrooms help shape children's habits and rules of behavior early on in their lives—and these needs are not very different from what we need as adults. At work, you may hear co-

workers say, "I'm going outside to get some fresh air for a few minutes" or "I need to take a walk to clear my head."

A quick 15-minute break helps adults tackle the rest of their day, and the same is true for children. More importantly, **physical engagement helps children build the foundations of their social skills**, particularly for children who are naturally shy or have difficulty with certain developmental areas. Kids can learn empathy by sharing, and build self-esteem and leadership skills by strategizing and working as part of a team.

Daily activity also helps boost balance, motor function, brain function, and cognition. According to a **growing body of research**, movement increases blood and oxygen flow, which positively affects cognitive development, physical health, and mental well-being.

I have supported teachers by teaching them how to use media in the classroom for breaks. YouTube is a great resource for finding videos to guide movement breaks and exercises. Teachers can also allow for free dance or movement periods during their classes.

Here are a few other ways teachers can seize opportunities that allow children to be more active:

1. Set ground rules for play.

Inviting children to move around more in the classroom can feel like inviting pandemonium. But as with all new strategies, the key is to set ground rules so children know what to expect. Before inviting them to move about, explain the purpose of an exercise that requires physical activity. Plan lessons and activities—even non-educational ones like jumping jacks—beforehand with clear objectives, time limits, and a backup plan in case the activity doesn't go as expected.

2. Make learning activities more active.

Create gallery walks in which children must travel around the room to observe visual aids for different parts of a lesson. Have children form groups to discuss and answer lesson questions, then have them write their answers on the board. Play board games tied to the current lesson and include spaces that call for students to do push-ups or jumping jacks. Making children carry their assignments to your desk, rather than passing them forward, can also introduce more movement into their day.

3. Encourage periodic breaks.

Midmorning snacks are an important way for adults to hold their hunger in check until lunch, and kids should have the same opportunity. Hunger can be one of the biggest distractions to learning, and offering snacks can also be a physical activity. Line up juice and snacks on a table at one end of the room, and have children take their refreshments back to their desks or to another designated area for some variety.

4. Take midday walks.

Taking a quick walk outside can do wonders to help lift the fog from a child's brain. If possible, plan lessons that can occur outside, or incorporate a 10- to 15-minute window around noon for the class to take a walk around campus. Walking offers fresh air and is one of the simplest and most effective forms of everyday physical activity.

There's a long way to go before incorporating physical activity into general lesson plans becomes the norm. In my practice, therapeutic play that emphasizes physical activity is paramount for children to acquire important cognitive and physical skills. When kids are moving, they're having more fun, often making lessons feel less like work.

However, we can't just state that activity is good for learning; we also have to prove it by tracking the performance and development of children who are more active. Once we begin to measure these effects,

we can better understand how to implement activities into the broader educational system and better gauge which ones will give children the greatest health and learning benefits.

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