

Why Kids Shouldn't Sit Still in Class

Sit still. It's the mantra of every classroom.

But that is changing as evidence builds that taking brief activity breaks during the day helps children learn and be more attentive in class, and a growing number of programs designed to promote movement are being adopted in schools.

"We need to recognize that children are movement-based," said Brian Gatens, the superintendent of schools in Emerson, N.J. "In schools, we sometimes are pushing against human nature in asking them to sit still and be quiet all the time."

"We fall into this trap that if kids are at their desks with their heads down and are silent and writing, we think they are learning," Mr. Gatens added. "But what we have found is that the active time used to energize your brain makes all those still moments better," or more productive.

A [2013 report from the Institute of Medicine](#) concluded that children who are more active "show greater attention, have faster cognitive processing speed and perform better on standardized academic tests than children who are less active." And a study released in January by Lund University in Sweden shows that students, especially boys, who had daily physical education, did better in school.

"Daily physical activity is an opportunity for the average school to become a high-performing school," said Jesper Fritz, a doctoral student at Lund University and physician at the Skane University Hospital in Malmo who was the study's lead author.

"Activity helps the brain in so many ways," said James F. Sallis, a professor of family medicine and public health at the University of California, San Diego, who has done [research on the association between activity breaks](#) and classroom behavior. "Activity stimulates more blood vessels in the brain to support more brain cells. And there is evidence that active kids do better on standardized tests and pay attention more in school."

John Ratey, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the author of "[Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain](#)," said: "Movement activates all the brain cells kids are using to learn, it wakes up the brain."

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"Plus," he added, "it makes kids want to come to school more — it's fun to do these activities."

But not all districts are embracing the trend of movement breaks.

"The bottom line is that with only six and a half hours during the day, our priority is academics," said Tom Hernandez, the director of community relations for the Plainfield School District in Illinois, about 40 miles southwest of Chicago. He said that under state law, the schools provide daily physical education classes and that teachers in the district find ways to give students time during the day to refresh and recharge.

“Kids aren’t meant to sit still all day and take in information,” said Steve Boyle, one of the co-founders of the [National Association of Physical Literacy](#), which aims to bring movement into schools. “Adults aren’t wired that way either.”

Mr. Boyle’s association has introduced a series of three- to five-minute videos called “BrainErgizers” that are being used in schools and Boys and Girls Clubs in 15 states and in Canada, Mexico, Ireland and Australia, he said. [A version of the program](#) is available to schools at no charge.

The program is designed so that three to five times a day, teachers can set aside a few minutes for their students to watch a video and follow the cues given by the instructors. In one typical video, the instructors are college students of all shapes and sizes at the University of Connecticut who do a quick warm-up and then lead kids through a mini workout involving movements from several sports: baseball, basketball and a triathlon. That’s followed by a cool-down.

“At the end of the week, kids have gotten an hour or more worth of movement, and it’s all done in the classroom with no special equipment,” Mr. Boyle said. “We’re not looking to replace gym classes, we’re aiming to give kids more minutes of movement per week. And by introducing sports into the videos, giving kids a chance to try sports they may not have ever tried before.”

Julie Goldstein, principal of the Breakthrough Magnet School in Hartford, Conn., said her school has been using BrainErgizers since the spring of 2015.

It’s easy for the teachers to implement, and “easy for the students to follow,” Mrs. Goldstein said. She said the program has “helped them focus and bring up their energy level in the classroom.”

Scott McQuigg, chief executive and a co-founder of [GoNoodle](#), a classroom movement program used in more than 60,000 elementary schools in the United States credits Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” Initiative with helping to bring movement and the health of children into the public consciousness.

“We call this the Movement movement,” Mr. McQuigg said. “If we invest three to five minutes for our kids to move in the classroom, we are actually going to optimize the next 45 minutes for learning. That small investment in time has such a big yield for teachers.”

GoNoodle, which offers free and paid videos, aims to entertain kids while they are moving, Mr. McQuigg said. GoNoodle and other “brain break” videos can be [found on the website for “Let’s Move! Active Schools.”](#) part of Mrs. Obama’s “Let’s Move!” initiative.

“We have purposely not gone after this as an exercise program,” Mr. McQuigg said. “This is a digital generation that expects to be entertained, and we think we can do more good around getting them to move if they are entertained.”

For example, GoNoodle videos have kids running alongside their desks through a virtual obstacle course or following along with dance moves.

Joseph E. Donnelly, professor of medicine and director of the Center for Physical Activity and Weight Management at the University of Kansas Medical Center, said one of the good things about kids being more physically active in classrooms is that everyone is moving at the same time.

“In physical education classes, there is a lot of standing around, a lot of minutes of kids waiting to do an activity, and sometimes kids are only moving for about 15 minutes during a 50-minute class,” said Dr. Donnelly, who co-authored a [statement on the effects of physical activity](#) and academic achievement in children that was published last year by the American College of Sports Medicine. “If you do movement

in class a few times a day, that can add up to at least an extra 60 minutes more of movement per week.”

Lindsay DiStefano, an associate professor in the department of kinesiology at the University of Connecticut, said the country is due for a major shift toward appreciating the benefits of physical activity in the classroom.

“In 1961, [President Kennedy said](#) school kids needed physical activity to thrive, but in the past 20 years, the pendulum has totally shifted the opposite way because schools are feeling the pressure to have students do well on standardized tests,” Ms. DiStefano said. “We are not thinking about the child as an entire person, how physical activity helps them cope with the stresses of school and actually benefits them in the classroom.”