

The benefits of physical activity for mental health

Mental health problems have increased among children over several years in high-income countries. At the same time, we see a reduction in children's movement competency compared with children of the 1980's and increased reporting of children's sedentary behaviour. (Andermo et al., 2020; Pill & Harvey, 2019).

Associations between physical activity and mental health among children

Associations between physical activity and mental health in young people have been known for some time. Physical activity has a positive effect on children's self-esteem, depressive thinking and cognitive functioning (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Biddle et al., 2019). Physical activity appears to improve determinants of mental health, such as depression, global self-worth and self-efficacy (Camero et al., 2012). **More frequent physical activity and sport is found to independently contribute to greater wellbeing and lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms in both sexes** (McMahon et al., 2017).

On average, physical activity leads to improved mental health outcomes for all children (Ahn & Fedewa, 2011).

Concerningly, lower levels of physical activity in childhood has been associated with adult depression (Jacka et al., 2011)

The 'peak period' for physical activity for children once was immediately after school. It no longer is for a variety of reasons, such as parents reporting more concern about their children's safety in playing outside or using active means of transportation than was the case in the past. Schools have also decreased the occurrence of school sport and other opportunities (like Daily Physical Education) due to a perceived need by teachers for more instructional time (Ahn & Fedewa, 2011). When physical activity is restricted during school hours, children do not compensate for loss of physical activity after school, resulting in children who are incredibly sedentary throughout the majority of the day (Dale et al., 2000).

School-related physical activity interventions and mental health among children

School-related physical activity interventions may reduce anxiety, increase resilience, improve wellbeing and increase positive mental health in children (Andermo et al., 2020).

For children diagnosed as cognitively impaired or emotionally disturbed, studies have found that the effect sizes from randomly controlled trial studies were significantly greater compared to children who were typically developing and did not have an emotional disorder (Ahn & Fedewa, 2011). In a review study, physical activity was found to be consistently associated with mental health in children with special education needs. Structured types of physical activity including physical education classes were more strongly related to mental health than overall physical activity (Yang et al., 2021).

Physical education programs have been found to have positive effects on the physical activity and emotional wellbeing of primary school children (Kliziene et al., 2021).

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