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## The Compelling Connections Between Physical Activity and Mental Health

by Carol LaLiberte

Watch how young children move. If they are walking down a hallway with square tiles, they might try to hop over one square with each leap or fit both feet in a square. When outdoors, hills seem to call to them to roll downward and curbs to balance one foot at a time. If your goal, as the adult, is to try to get these children from point A to point B, it may feel frustrating that their every step is an adventure. Movement, control of their bodies, and novel approaches to asphalt, slides, and walking are all part of children's brain and body development. Mastery of these brings squeals of delight, "I did it!" "Watch me!" and feelings of agency and control of self, not to mention accomplishment.

Are these positive feelings of self-worth indicators of good mental health in-the-making and, if so, is physical activity the cause?

Researchers have longed to know the answers to these questions and many studies are underway to discern the effect of physical movement on decreased mental health symptoms and diagnoses. Studies have largely focused on older children, adolescents, and adults, but more needs to be understood with regard to young children and the impact of movement on conditions such as depression and anxiety.

In recent years, early childhood professionals have seen a rise in referrals for behavioral disorders in young children and a decrease in time allotted for free movement, especially outdoors at recess. Because of the increased demands in the area of academics, the daily schedule has squeezed and shortened the planned time for running, jumping, and swinging or kicking balls. But how, if at all, are these two things intertwined? Can we generalize the research on the positive impact of exercise on older children and adolescents downward to younger children?

All living beings move: some for survival and others for pleasure. Fetuses move as soon as their bodies allow—even before their brains regulate their doing so. Their movements, involuntary at first, increase

in measure, as any pregnant woman can attest. The nudges and kicks are all reminders of the growing and changing fetus she is carrying. After birth, babies move initially by turning their heads reflexively as well as kicking and flailing arms. By the toddler years, they delight in running, jumping, and climbing. Movement is an integral part of who the young child is as a person and gaining control over their bodies is one of the primary tasks of the early years. Children's movements and ability to control their physical nature also impact their social development.

Four-year-old James, a preschooler in my class, knocked children over with his quick twists and turns and often left children alarmed and in tears when he moved in a way that they deemed too rough or sudden. James needed to move but he needed to do so in a way that was safe. We provided lots of outdoor time during which he could run and climb without the same restrictions that he was confined to inside the classroom. James was a child who more timid children avoided—his uncontrolled movements were too unpredictable for their liking. In doing so, they reflected a message back to James: you are scary



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and I choose to not play with you. Does this link between how we move and how we are perceived by others, in turn, affect how we feel about ourselves?

James and all of the other similarly physical children I have taught through the years provided all of the evidence I needed at the time. That being said, there is little in the way of empirical studies showing just how it is that physical movement can prevent or lessen the incidence of mental health problems.

An article in *Psychiatric Times* noted, "Vigorous physical activity resulted in children ages 7-9 years of age having increased focus and greater cognitive flexibility. Their processing speed also increased and the referrals for suspected ADD and ADHD decreased. Movement changes the brain and it appears those changes are positive. Greater attention means fewer disruptions in classrooms. This was especially true for boys.

"In adolescents, there is a link between lower depression and physical activity. Teens who were physically active at least one hour a day reported less symptoms of depression. Studies point to changes in the brain that increase serotonin and

also may help with sleep problems. Increased sleep can improve mental health. Insufficient sleep has been associated with an increase in behavior problems with children as well as challenges with higher order cognitive tasks."

The opposite is true too. Slow, controlled movement such as yoga has resulted in benefits such as increased self-regulation and coping skills, as well as reduced anxiety-related behaviors. Concerned about the high rate of expulsions of preschool children in Connecticut, Peg Oliveira found a connection between restricting movement in child care and rising expulsions of children, prompting her to start a non-profit yoga organization called 108 Monkeys. This organization trains volunteers and teachers to bring play-based yoga into classrooms.

Additionally, a study conducted in Norway found that children between the ages of six and eight years who engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity were less likely to have symptoms of depression (*Pediatrics*, February 2017).

Clearly, while there may be a bidirectional relationship between physical activity and mental health, future studies

are needed. There already exists enough evidence to make a compelling case for the fact that physical activity is a necessary component of a child's everyday experience at home and in care settings. The best results occur when physical activity takes place every day in an outdoor environment, as these have the strongest correlations with positive mental health outcomes.

Moving and mastering our bodies helps us feel a level of accomplishment and control. The mechanisms of how or under what circumstances physical movement can prevent or lessen the impact of mental health symptoms has yet to be fully understood. However, if a child is able to focus more intently, learn more quickly, engage in positive relationships with others, and feel a sense of mastery over their own minds and bodies, then it stands to reason that these attributes would go a long way toward decreasing issues related to depression, attention and hyperactivity disorders.

By strengthening muscles and flooding our systems with positive neurotransmitters that are naturally produced by our body, we are consequently fortifying our brains with the stimulation needed to relate, learn, and be intentional in our actions. Both brain and body benefit in ways that positively impact our physical, social emotional, and cognitive domains of development.

## References

Wagner, Karen D. (2015, January). Mental Health Benefits of Exercise in Children. *Psychiatric Times*, vol. 32, Issue 1.

Zahl, T. et al. (2017, February). Physical Activity, Sedentary Behavior and Symptoms of Major Depression in Middle Childhood. *Pediatrics*.



# BRUSHING UP ON ORAL HEALTH HABITS

It's understandable that children sometimes get nervous about their first few dental visits. Having their teeth and mouths examined can feel intrusive and what young children hear about dental visits affects what they think an upcoming visit will be like.

Information provided by National Center on  
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## TIPS

## TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR DENTAL VISITS



**Be Positive** – Use positive statements about what will happen during a visit



**Don't bring up shots or possible pain**



**Keep your fears to yourself** – If you have fears, do not share them with your child



**Read books or watch videos together**



**Role-play visiting the dentist**



**Make dental visits fun** – Let children bring their favorite stuffed animal or wear a special outfit or costume. You can also plan an activity after the visit.

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