

The Benefits of Movement in Schools

[Nina Fiore](#)

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Synopsis

Regularly-scheduled movement breaks throughout the day and movement used within and between lessons results in better-behaved, more engaged students who can more easily focus on and retain what they are supposed to be learning.

Movement has been shown by educational, cognitive, psychological, medical, and behavioral research to be one of the best ways to get *all* children - neurotypical and neurodiverse (special needs) children alike - to gain control over their behavior and to engage with and retain what is being taught to them. When you look at the research around movement and productivity/engagement - for children of all ages and a variety of learning styles -- what is truly shocking is that every school does *not* already schedule movement into the school day and incorporate movement into school lessons.

If you read my last post, on the ever-growing [Need for Inclusion Schools](#) you'll already be familiar with my argument for why Special Needs children and typical children all benefit from being in classrooms together, and how regular movement in those classrooms can help

facilitate this inclusion. Regularly-scheduled movement breaks throughout the day and movement used within and between lessons, help all children (both neurotypical and neurodiverse) regulate themselves, which leads to better-behaved, more engaged students who can more easily focus on and retain information from their lessons.

Most schools not only ignore [the latest research on](#) best teaching practices, but the teacher-centric, “sit still and listen” method of teaching still employed is one of the main reasons so many neurodiverse children are not able to be in regular schools to begin with,^[1] why so many children are said to have “behavioral problems” in schools in general, and why so many school children are [being diagnosed with ADHD](#)^[2]. It seems that the problem is less with the children, and more with the way schools are typically organized and run. Schools need to change with the times, become more flexible, more relevant, and more engaging, so that all students can connect with and learn from the material presented to them more effectively.

Regular movement has been shown to increase focus and retention in children and adults of all ages. Movement also helps all children regulate (ie, adjust their energy), and it therefore has been shown to [lower rates of behavioral problems](#) such as fighting and bullying^[3]. Many “behavioral problems” in schools today would be eased, and diagnoses would be fewer, if more movement was incorporated into every aspect of school.^[4]

There is no better time than the present to advocate for this change in schools. Every day, there is a new article highlighting research which shows how bad sitting for long periods of time is, not only for

productivity, but for overall health. A recent article even cites an endocrinologist at the Mayo Clinic as saying, "If you've been sitting for an hour, you've been sitting for too long."^[5] And yet, in all these articles that go on about [treadmill desks](#), standing desks, fitness bands, fitness trackers, and about the physical, emotional and mental problems that arise from sitting, there is no mention of how this issue concerns [children and schools](#).^[6] This needs to change.

If children are being forced to sit still in school for 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, year after year, for fear of punishment, suspension, expulsion, and psychological diagnoses if they actually do need to move, then how on earth do we expect them to have healthy, active lifestyles when they become adults?! How is this transformation supposed to happen? Wouldn't it make a lot more sense to institute healthy active policies into school so that all children grow up with the habits that not only help them learn best, but also help them become healthy, active adults?

For many years now, Finnish schools have understood the importance of incorporating regular movement into the school day, and approach it in a variety of ways. Most Finnish schools provide 15 minutes of recess for every 45 minutes of instruction. [Researchers](#) say this accounts for part of their ongoing academic successes.^[7] During the same time period, US and UK schools have, alternatively, reduced the amount of movement and recess time or break time that they offer primary school students, and students' performance has suffered accordingly.

Individual teachers and schools can make a big difference in their students' lives by incorporating movement into the lessons, classrooms, and/or school day. It also helps, of course, if school

policies support their efforts. An emphasis on regular breaks for movement should be incorporated into EVERY classroom, into every lesson, and be made an important part of overall school policy.^[8] US schools are slowly starting to respect the need for recess and movement. Whether implementing school-wide movement breaks or recess, introducing movement breaks between lessons, or even incorporating movement into the lessons themselves, schools are slowly realizing how beneficial movement is to boosting academic performance and to regulating behavior and attention.

Schools don't need extra space and they don't need special instructors in order to do this. They mostly need to change their mindset and accept that movement is beneficial. Movement breaks can be included between lessons very easily. Teachers can reduce the amount of instruction time per lesson from 40 to 30 minutes, and then use the remaining 10 minutes for movement breaks, so that children are clear and focused before the next lesson begins. There are a number of movement-in-school programs that train teachers with moves for calming or invigorating students (whichever is needed at the time). There are also instructional podcasts, apps, and DVDs that can be purchased by a school in order to give teachers some ideas on what moves to give their students at what times. However, basic jumping jacks, running in place, and some stretches behind the desk are also very effective in helping students get the movement their bodies and brains need in order to perform at their very best.

The movement breaks cause a win-win situation, because the children are getting some exercise and regulation and, in addition, the shorter lessons are more easily remembered. The movement itself also helps children focus and retain more information from the lesson. Therefore,

having 30 minute lessons plus 10 minutes of movement in between them, means a happier, more engaged student body, as well as students who will retain more information over the course of the day than would be retained from regular 40 minute lessons. More time teaching is not always better, especially if the lesson is not being absorbed and retained.^[9]

Other schools are incorporating movement into the actual lesson plans because they have found that the lessons that students understand deepest and retain longest are those lessons which incorporate movement. Whether it is using your own feet as a source of measurement, role playing a fight between the Aztecs and the Conquistadores, or having students circle and crash into one another to physically demonstrate how atomic particles behave during fission and fusion, students are more engaged and have better retention of subject matter when they are physically active during the lessons. The New Jersey Education Alliance, for example, prepared informational booklets and a website to give examples of movement-based lessons. They emphasize that "Students often learn better by doing."^[10]

The benefits of incorporating movement in lessons is supported further by research currently being done in "embodied cognition", in the field of [Educational Technology](#). It shows that children, especially when they are young or if the material is difficult, can better understand concepts when they use movement to physically act out the concepts. Researchers at Columbia University show that embodied cognition makes abstract concepts more tangible. It "allows the learner to develop a "feel" for the concept being described, a physical sense that is more comprehensible and compelling than a concept that remains an abstract mental entity."^[11]

Still other schools are recognizing the benefits of giving the entire school 30 minutes or more of movement per day, either in the school gym or playground or even in a local park. The principal of a progressive inclusion school in Upper Manhattan, NYC, guides children through a series of warm ups and supervises Free Play every morning and afternoon in their school gym. She says it helps all the children, special needs and typical children alike, with both behavior and attention.^[12] Studies show that Recess, or Free Play (movement activities where children direct their own activities and are not directed by adults) is incredibly important to children's development of executive functioning and coping skills they will need in order to be successful adults, such as negotiating, planning, and coordinating with peers, and making decisions on their. These type of skills build independence and confidence, which greatly help with long-term success in life. Yet, studies show that the amount of Free Play in most American children's lives has declined tremendously over the past few decades, with many teachers restricting free play even further as a "punishment" for children with behavior problems, which of course, only increases their behavior problems. Researchers attribute many problems - including increases in children's behavior problems, anxiety, depression, and other psychopathologies, over that same time period - to the decline in free play.^[13]

A school district in Milwaukee, for example, brought back previously-cut phys ed classes 3 days a week this past year, in order to improve attendance records, boost academic achievement, and to increase student and parent engagement in schools.^[14] They found that kids came to school more often when they knew they'd have physical education that day, while recitals and sporting events brought parents

into the school more often, making them more engaged in their children's learning. The trial was so successful, the school district will be offering physical education every day next year.

Movement benefits students' work and behavior in school, their understanding of difficult concepts, their retention of learned information, and their lifelong health and well-being. Movement is one of the most beneficial ways for ALL children to engage with and retain the information they are being taught in school. It makes lessons more engaging and memorable, it helps students focus, it regulates student behavior, it helps foster inclusive environments for all children, and it makes children want to come to school every day.

Keeping children active, engaged, and healthy, in the environment where they spend the majority of their waking hours, should be a top priority for all schools. Luckily, regular movement does not require a lot of space, a lot of time, nor a lot of money to implement. It mostly requires a change in teacher and school attitudes so that children's need for movement is not perceived as a negative.

[1] [The Selling of Attention Deficit Disorder](#) by Alan Schwarz

[2] [The Role of Recess in Children's Cognitive Performance and School Adjustment](#) by Anthony D. Pellegrini and Catherine M. Bohn (PDF)

[3] [Instruction in motion brings PE into classroom](#) by Regina Whitmer

[4] [Move Your Body, Grow Your Brain](#) by Donna Wilson

[5] [I Was Quite Surprised by Some Things on This LifeSpan Treadmill Desk](#) by Mat Honan

[6] [The Role of Recess in Children's Cognitive Performance and School Adjustment](#) by Anthony D. Pellegrini and Catherine M. Bohn (PDF)

[7] [Move Your Body, Grow Your Brain](#) by Donna Wilson

[8] [Department of Multicultural Education](#) (Palm Beach School District)

[9] [Get Your Students Moving](#) by Mike Kuczala and James McCall

[10] [Let's Move! How Body Movements Drive Learning Through Technology](#), Annie Murphy Paul

[11] <http://insideschools.org/component/schools/school/8205> Castle Bridge School, Manhattan on InsideSchools.org

[12] [The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents](#) by Peter Gray (PDF)

[13] [To Boost Attendance, Milwaukee Schools Revive Art, Music And Gym](#) by Erin Toner (NPR)

[14] [Action-Packed Classrooms, K-5](#), forward by John Joseph Ratey

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