

Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Written by the educational professionals at Cornerstone, each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional and behavioral problems.

TRENDS



"Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment."

"Students who engage in a regular program of physical exercise in school display measurable and significant improvements in executive function, brain development and brain activity."

References:

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- Pontifex MB, Saliba BJ, Raine LB, et al. (2013) Exercise improves behavioral, neurocognitive, and scholastic performance in children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *J Pediatr*. 162:543-551.
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THE BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL EXERCISE ON MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

There is a growing body of evidence indicating that physical activity and fitness activities can benefit both the mental health and academic performance for children and youth. Because children spend so much time at school, schools have a unique opportunity to help children become more healthy and active. School based research suggests that students who engage in a regular program of physical exercise in school display measurable and significant improvements in executive function, brain development and brain activity. Recent studies demonstrate that exercise programs can be easily implemented throughout the school day in gymnastics, sports, dance, and classroom movement activities.

Regular exercise can have a positive impact on symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, and more. Exercise relieves stress, improves memory, helps children sleep better, and boosts their overall mood. Research indicates that even modest amounts of exercise can make a difference. Even just a few minutes of physical activity are better than none at all. The key is to encourage moderate physical activity—however little—on most days.

Physical activity is an effective intervention for children who experience difficulties managing their feelings of stress. Students who experience elevated levels of stress experience muscle tension, especially in the face, neck, and shoulders. This can result in back or neck pain, headaches, tightness in the chest, pounding pulse, and muscle cramps. Physical activity helps to relax the muscles and relieve tension in the body. Students who participate in regular exercise routines learn that they can manage their stress in healthy ways.

Studies show that exercise can aid in the treatment of mild to moderate depression. Exercise promotes changes in the brain, including neural growth, reduced inflammation, and new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and well-being. Exercise can serve as a distraction, allowing

children and youth to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed depression. Exercise is a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment. It relieves tension and stress, boosts physical and mental energy, and promotes self-calming through the release of endorphins.

Exercising regularly is one of the easiest and most effective ways to reduce the symptoms of ADHD and improve concentration, motivation, memory, and mood. Physical activity immediately boosts the brain's dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin levels—all of which affect focus and attention.

Some simple things that classroom teachers can do to get students moving:

Take energy breaks. A short physical activity break of three to four minutes can get the blood pumping, relieve boredom, reduce tension and increase your students' level of alertness. While it is not time spent on-task, it will make students more able to learn, so it is definitely worthwhile. Some of the best energy breaks are performed to music, using on-the-spot aerobics movements designed to move the limbs and get the blood flowing.

Consider using Wii games in the classroom. Teachers around the country are engaging their students both mentally and physically by using Wii games for learning. Some are using Wii sports games for fitness and to integrate their curriculum.

Assign a "get active" student project. Encourage students to get moving outside of school as well. Assign them to track their TV time, computer time and physical activity for a week. For the following week, challenge them to double their activity time for the next week and chart it again. Not only will this encourage youth to be more active, but they'll also practice goal-setting, data tracking and organizational skills. To learn more about classroom movement activities visit www.teachhub.com/use-fitness-breaks-keep-your-students-alert.