



Physical activity and mental health

Regular physical activity is great for children and young people's healthy development and helps prevent and relieve mental health issues

How does exercise affect mental health and wellbeing?

Physical activity promotes many aspects of child and adolescent development, including social and emotional skills, as well as physical development of motor skills.

It also supports mental wellbeing. We know that high levels of inactivity can lead to a greater risk of both physical and mental health problems.

Physical activity:

- can increase levels of serotonin and endorphins, the neurotransmitters involved in regulating and improving mood
- promotes sleep – which also helps regulate moods, increase energy levels and improve memory and learning
- increases the connections between the brain neurons, which improves memory and learning capacity

- pumps blood to the brain to boost mood, concentration and alertness
- promotes relaxation by reducing skeletal muscle tension
- provides children and young people with an outlet for excess energy and frustration, which relieves tension
- provides an opportunity for children and young people to socialise and meet new people, reducing loneliness and isolation
- improves motor and cognitive skills, which boosts self-esteem
- distracts children and young people from negative thoughts.

These benefits also serve to improve classroom behaviour and promote a more positive learning environment.

How much exercise do children and young people need?

The 24-Hour movement guidelines outline the following recommendations for exercise for children and young people:

- **Infants** (birth to one year): 30 minutes per day of supervised interactive floor-based play including tummy time, reaching and grasping, pushing and pulling and crawling.
- **Toddlers** (1-2 years): at least 180 minutes a day, including energetic play such as running and jumping.
- **Pre-schoolers** (3-5 years): at least 180 minutes a day of which 60 minutes is energetic play such as running, jumping and kicking and throwing.
- **Children** (5-12 years) and young people (13-17 years): at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day.

The percentage of children and young people meeting current guidelines is:

- 61% of two to five-year-olds
- 26% of five to 12-year-olds
- 7.9% of 13 to 17-year-olds.

What can your early learning service or school do to promote exercise?

Services and schools provide many opportunities for children and young people to join in physical activity, through both structured activities like formal classes or team sports and spontaneous play.

Though there are challenges integrating formal exercise programs into the curriculum (it takes specialist teachers, sports equipment and facilities), there are many ways you can engage children and young people in physical activity.

You can:

- hold outdoor or walking classes where a lesson is conducted 'on the move'
- establish a 'bush kinder' of 'bush class' session or incorporate walks to local parks or nature reserves as part of your early learning program
- include outdoor activities in subjects such as maths, science or geography
- try standing lessons to break up extended sitting time
- provide bats and balls and other play equipment during lunch and recess
- have play spaces and play equipment to encourage physical activity
- see if it's possible to partner with local sport and recreation clubs and local councils so you can use their equipment and facilities – perhaps you could apply for a physical activity grant to fund a project
- provide safe and secure bike parking
- promote active travel, such as encouraging children and young people to walk as much as possible and welcome active travel ideas like a walking school bus to your local community.

Some children and young people dislike competitive sport and anxiety about competition may worsen existing mental health issues.

You could consider offering non-competitive physical activities such as yoga and Pilates as an alternative. Or offer activities where the focus is on participation, not competition. It's more important for children and young people to learn that being active is fun rather than focusing on winning.

References

Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years (birth to 5 years). Retrieved from

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/05/24-hour-movement-guidelines-birth-to-5-years-brochure.pdf>

Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Young People (5 to 17 years). Retrieved from

<https://www.health.gov.au/topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians/for-children-and-young-people-5-to-17-years>

External links

[Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years \(birth to 5 years\)](#)

[Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Young People \(5 to 17 years\)](#)

Better Health Channel – [Exercise and mental health](#)