

Benefits of Physical Activity

Research shows physical activity, both structured (e.g., physical education) and unstructured (e.g., recess, free play), has a positive impact on a child’s physical and mental health, academic performance, and social-emotional development.^{1, 2}

Facts on Georgia’s Youth



Among youth ages 10-17:

- 13.4% are overweight³
- 17.1% are obese⁴



Approximately **2 in 3** middle and high school students do not meet the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day.⁵

Physical Activity Recommendations, by Age

- 0-1 year: Daily activities with adult (e.g., peek-a-boo, tummy time)⁶
- 1-3 years: At least 30 minutes of **structured play** daily (e.g., creating an “obstacle course” encouraging the child to move over, under, around, or through the “obstacle”); At least 60 minutes of **unstructured physical activity/play** (e.g., recess, free play) daily⁷
- 6 to 17 years: 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day (e.g., recess, sports practice, walking)⁸

Impact of Physical Activity and Play

Structured and unstructured physical activity impact the following areas:



Learning and Academic Performance

- **Improved** grades and standardized test scores²
- **Higher** recall rate of vocabulary words¹⁰
- **Higher** grades for students performing below grade level¹¹



Social and Emotional Development

- **Increases** opportunity for development of social, intrapersonal, and communication skills, especially for young children^{12, 13}
- **Increases** brain development in areas associated with attention, information processing, storage, retrieval, coping, and positive affect¹⁴
- **Promotes** self-regulation and fosters coping techniques among young children^{15, 16}



Mental and Behavioral Health

- **Lower** levels of depression, stress, and psychological distress¹⁷
- **Higher** levels of positive self-image, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being¹⁸



Classroom Engagement and Productivity

- **Helps** stay on-task in the classroom¹⁹
- **Decreases** inappropriate behaviors, such as distracting other students²⁰
- **Promotes** executive function growth (e.g., planning, organization, flexibility) among young children²¹



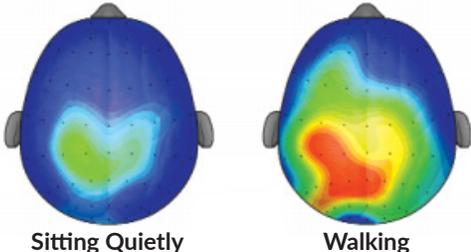
Physical Health and Fitness

- **Increases** opportunity for development of cognitive and motor skills²²
- **Builds** strong bones and muscles²³
- **Reduces** the risk of developing health conditions (e.g., heart disease, Type 2 diabetes)²⁴



Cognitive and Brain Health

Average composite of 20 students’ brains taking the same test after sitting quietly or taking a 20 minute walk



Reprinted with permission of Dr. C.H. Hillman²⁵

Progress for Georgia's Kids

House Bill 1283, which was signed into law in 2022, outlined important steps to safeguard recess for Georgia students. House Bill 1283:²⁶

- Ensures that kindergarten through fifth grade students have access to recess
- Encourages schools to provide an average of 30 minutes a day of recess

Policy Recommendations

-  Require that K-5 students receive a minimum of 30 minutes of unstructured activity (e.g., recess) and 6-8 students receive a minimum of 20 minutes of unstructured activity per day
-  Ensure that neither physical activity nor recess opportunities are withheld for disciplinary reasons
-  Ensure physical activity during recess is not used as punishment (e.g., walking laps instead of free play)
-  Design built environments utilizing elements that encourage physical activity for youth and adults
-  Increase access to afterschool and summer learning programs that support healthy and active lifestyles through opportunities for formal and informal physical activity and recreation

Terms to Know

Body Mass Index (BMI): Found by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by the square height in meters. For children, weight status is determined by using age- and sex-specific percentiles for BMI.²⁷

Structured Play/Physical Activity: Any form of play/physical activity where an adult gives a child a specific purpose, task, or learning objective (i.e., solving a puzzle, Physical Education/P.E.)²⁸

Overweight: A BMI at, or above, the 85th percentile but below the 95th percentile.²⁹

Obese: A BMI above the 95th percentile.³⁰

Unstructured Play/Physical Activity: Open-ended play/physical activity that has no specific learning objective (i.e., recess, free play)³¹



References for Benefits of Physical Activity

Suggested citation: Voices for Georgia's Children. (2023). Fact Sheet: Benefits of Physical Activity. Voices for Georgia's Children. <https://adobe.ly/3GgR2sS>.

- 1 Active Living Research. Active education: Growing evidence on physical activity and academic performance. Accessed July 28, 2022. https://activelivingresearch.org/sites/activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_ActiveEducation_Jan2015.pdf.
- 2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The association between school-based physical activity, including physical education, and academic performance. Accessed July 28, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pa-pe_paper.pdf.
- 3 Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. 2022 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) data query. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB). Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.childhealthdata.org/browse/survey/results?q=10031&r=12>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Georgia Department of Education. "Georgia Student Health Survey: Statewide Result, List Year 2022, State Report 2022, Question 42." Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/GSHS-II/Pages/GSHS-Results.aspx>.
- 6 Society of Healthy and Physical Education (SHAPE) America. Active Start. Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://www.shapeamerica.org/standards/guidelines/activestart.aspx>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 United States Department of Health and Human Services. "Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd Edition." Accessed October 6, 2023. https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Physical_Activity_Guidelines_2nd_edition.pdf.
- 9 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention . "Physical Education." Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/physical-education.htm>.
- 10 Active Living Research. "Active Education: Growing Evidence on Physical Activity and Academic Performance." Accessed November 1, 2022. https://activelivingresearch.org/sites/activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_ActiveEducation_Jan2015.pdf.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 American Academy of Pediatrics. "The Crucial Role of Recess in School." Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/131/1/183/30893/The-Crucial-Role-of-Recess-in-School>.
- 13 Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, et al. The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. *Pediatrics*. 2018. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30126932/>.
- 14 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance." Accessed November 23, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pa-pe_paper.pdf.
- 15 Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, et al. The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. *Pediatrics*. 2018. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30126932/>.
- 16 Nijhof SL, Vinkers CH, van Geelen SM, et al. Healthy play, better coping: The importance of play for the development of children in health and disease. *Neurosci Biobehav Rev*. 2018. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30273634/>.
- 17 American Psychology Association (2020). How and why to get children moving now. Retrieved February 22, 2024 from <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/children-exercise-strategies>
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention . "Physical Education." Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/physical-education.htm>.



References for Benefits of Physical Activity, p.2

- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, et al. The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. Pediatrics. 2018. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30126932/>.
- 22 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention . “Physical Education.” Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/physical-education.htm>.
- 23 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Physical Activity Facts. Accessed October 28, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/facts.htm>.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 GENYOUth Foundation. “The Wellness Impact: Enhancing Academic Success Through Healthy School Environments.” Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://genyouthnow.org/reports/the-wellness-impact-report/>.
- 26 Georgia General Assembly. HB 1283. Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/61896>.
- 27 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Defining Childhood Obesity.” Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/defining.html>.
- 28 Rock, Amanda. “Unstructured Play for Children.” Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/unstructured-play-2764971#:~:text=Unstructured%20play%20is%20a%20category,adults%20do%20not%20give%20directions>.
- 29 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Defining Childhood Obesity.” Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/defining.html>.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.