

Developing the Magical Mind Through Movement

by Debra Em Wilson

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Are you sitting down reading this article? Possibly drinking a cup of coffee? If you are, please set down your cup before trying this experiment. While sitting, draw a number 6 in the air with your right arm. At the same time, circle your right leg clockwise, off the floor. What happened? Your leg follows the circle of the 6. This simple experiment shows how our mind and body work together. One is not more important than the other. A fit body and mind help us accomplish daily tasks with ease.

There is an expression among PE teachers, *"No children left on their behinds."* This phrase was coined to balance the academic focus of President Bush's No Child Left Behind legislation. How is your child's school dealing with the increased academic demands? Are worksheets crowding out hands-on activities? Has time allocated for PE and recess been reduced or eliminated altogether?

In the book, *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*, Doctors Hirsch-Pasek and Golinkoff state that in the past, typical school-age children had about 40 percent of their time open for play. By 1997, that time for play had diminished to 24 percent. Approximately forty percent of school districts in America have eliminated recess. With today's schools focusing on academic progress, reducing movement opportunities may actually be holding back children from meeting academic goals.

Why are play, movement, and physical fitness so important? Inside our ears, we have this nifty little system called the vestibular system. Like the hub of a wheel, it integrates our vision, hearing, and skin sensations. If sluggish, children may have a difficult time learning and regulating behavior. Activities like swinging, skipping, running, twirling, and tumbling kick the vestibular system into high gear and enhance brain function.

Did you know that the two hemispheres of the brain are designed to constantly communicate with one another? When babies roll, crawl, climb, and are physically active, the hemispheres must talk to one another to coordinate movement. Coordinated movement creates "cell phone" efficiency in the brain. Just like cell phones, any gap in connections creates a, "can you hear me now" experience in the brain. For example, during reading, one hemisphere attends to letters and the sequence of words while the other side of the brain focuses on comprehending what is read. Reading fluency depends on an intricate conversation between the two hemispheres of the brain and a clear signal. Efficient communication reduces stress for children when faced with the fast-paced teaching common in today's classrooms. As babies grow into young children and teens, their continued involvement in physical activity is essential for academic success and emotional stability. A principle called, "heavy work" underlies activities like hauling wood, hammering nails, pushing, pulling, or digging in the dirt. Therapists recommend heavy work for children with attention issues. Heavy work has a natural calming effect on the brain and body. A child's ability to focus comes, in part, from strong stomach and back muscles (core postural muscles). These muscles help children balance and hold themselves upright. The muscles, developed through

movement, make it possible for a child to sit and focus in class.

Brain research shows that the cerebellum changes dramatically during adolescence by increasing the complexity of neural connections. The cerebellum is involved with physical coordination, processing mental tasks, decision-making, and social skills. Teens must keep moving during this time in their lives for ultimate brain development and learning power. Research comparing the academic progress of children who are fit to those who are not, showed higher academic achievement for the fit children.

What can you do to maintain a healthy fitness routine with your family and ultimately improve everyone's mental abilities? During the baby and toddler years, participate in infant massage. Give babies lots of tummy time while awake. The more time spent on their tummies and crawling, the more prepared their brains will be for academics. Support childcare programs that are play-based and hands-on.

In the elementary years, add movement to your child's learning process. Remember, this engages the vestibular system and helps children learn more easily. For example, when practicing spelling words, bounce a ball back and forth with your child. During each bounce, your child says a letter. Make homework fun by inviting children to sit on large fitness balls while at their desks. The bouncing stimulates the vestibular system and increases alertness levels. While teaching new concepts, use a multi-sensory approach (writing in flour, writing words in shaving cream while in the tub, practicing spelling words with sidewalk chalk while outdoors, or writing words with colorful washable markers on sliding glass doors or mirrors.)

If your child is struggling in school, be sure to include swinging, tumbling, and movement in their daily schedule. TV viewing, video games, and computer use dramatically reduce time spent playing, moving, and becoming fit. Insist your child's school maintains effective PE programs and recess.

Be sure teens keep PE in their school schedules, there is a tendency to eliminate PE when focusing on academic demands. Washing the car, gardening, mowing the lawn, cutting firewood, doing housework, and spending time in the beautiful outdoors keep teens fit and balance hormonal influences.

Adults and seniors need daily physical activity to maintain brain function. Remaining active and learning new skills are essential for good health. Playing with children brings out the inner child. Learning new games, revisiting childhood games, and teaching young children keep the brain healthy.

A wonderful poem, anonymously written, simply states what is most important for children:

I tried to teach my child with books. He just gave me puzzled looks.

I tried to teach my child with words. They often went unheard.

Despairingly, I turned aside, "How shall I teach this child," I cried.

Into my hands he placed the key.

"Come," he said, "and play with me."

Play is the true expression of our earliest childhood yearning. Through play and physical activity, the journey to mind-body health is enjoyable, engaging, and meaningful for the entire family.

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