



Why is physical activity in schools such an important wellbeing issue?

There are a variety of reasons why physical activity levels are critical to wellbeing and why that is particularly the case in schools. Failure to adequately address the issue and proactively engage with pupils not only leads to diminished attainment whilst they are in school but results in their entering adulthood with a poorer sense of wellbeing and less equipped to succeed.

Whilst not exhaustive, the following are all areas where healthy levels of physical activity in a school can make a positive difference for pupils:

Physical health

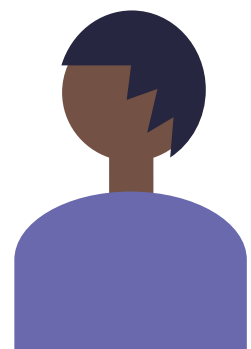
This is perhaps the most obvious but still important, particularly in the long-term. Physically active people are likely to live longer and much less likely to develop serious illnesses and conditions, from diabetes to heart disease and some forms of cancer. With lifestyles in general becoming less active, the likelihood of largely sedentary pupils changing bad habits is low. Some of these medical issues can develop while they are still in school as they fail to develop stronger hearts, bones and muscle.

Social development

Physical activity of all kinds, particularly sports, offer wide-ranging social development benefits - and this is still the case in even those that are not necessarily team-oriented. Leadership, teamwork, self-discipline, communication, risk awareness and appetite, positive competitive spirit - all of these can be developed by engaging pupils with various types of physical activity. And of course, beyond these, there is the opportunity to have fun and actively socialise with their peers.

Mental health

Physically active pupils have higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of stress and anxiety, and are less likely to become depressed. This is all in addition to enjoying the benefits of being physically well and more socialised, which are also crucial to wellbeing and resilience. Of significant import is the positive effect of physical activity on sleep quality, crucial in mood regulation and both physical and mental health in general. Physical activity is therefore critical for all members of the school community when it comes to building resilience and taking a positive approach to wellbeing.



Behaviour

Pupils in physically active schools are not only less prone to being disruptive, but are also able to concentrate more, develop better relationships with their peers, and exhibit more pro-social behaviour. This improves the classroom environment for all, which in turn has positive benefits, including on parents and teachers.



Educational attainment

Beyond the positive knock-on effects these other areas will have, scientific studies have shown that higher levels of activity do not necessarily strictly correspond to increased academic performance - but certainly have no negative effect. Part of this is the difficulty in measuring academic performance and what impacts it. However, pupils engaging in self-development activities (including sport, physical activity) achieved 10-20% higher GCSEs and that for young people there is a direct correlation between aerobic fitness and higher academic scores (iii).

Including a programme to deepen and broaden how a school approaches the physical activity levels of its pupils and staff is therefore a fundamental aspect of not only its approach to wellbeing, but the success of the school as a whole.

Over the coming weeks, we'll be publishing articles and webinars exploring the variety of ways schools can become more physically active as part of their whole-school approach to wellbeing.

Our thanks to the [Children's Health and Exercise Research Centre \(CHERC\)](#) of the University of Exeter for their assistance with this article. Further reading on wellbeing and attainment in a Public Health England document, '[The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment](#)'.

(i) Rasberry et al (2011). The association between school-based physical activity, including physical education, and academic performance: A systematic review of the literature. *Preventive Medicine*, 52, S10-S20

(ii) Lindner K (2002). The physical activity participation - academic performance relationship revisited. *Paediatric Exercise Science*, 14, 155-169

(iii) Buck S, Hillman C & Castelli D (2008). The relation of aerobic fitness to Stroop task performance in preadolescent children. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 40, 166-172