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Let 'em Loose!

How exercise—and **DANCE PARTIES**—boost kids' brain power

BY JENNIFER ABBASI

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY Marc Boutavant

The kids in Shannon Savona's second-grade classroom are all out of their seats, waving their arms, jumping, and stomping their feet as they groove to a PG-rated YouTube video. This isn't a case of Kids Gone Wild—it's how students at Red Hawk Elementary in Erie, CO, prep for math and science lessons.

"If students sit for too long, they're not as engaged, and some tune out," Savona says. "Movement is a great way to take a quick brain break. When it's time to focus again, they're more alert and better able to engage in discussions and complete their assignments."

After years of seeing recess and P.E. trimmed from the curriculum, schools, parents, and policy makers are finally pushing to get activity bursts, playtime, and gym back into the school day. That's because study after study shows that exercise helps boost children's classroom skills. What's more, neuroscientists have found that physical activity actually changes kids' brains in ways that prime them for learning (see "6 Perks of Exercise," opposite).

Recess Really Rules

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has also taken a stand, declaring that every child deserves and needs recess to learn. "Many schools have assumed that they could boost test scores by spending more time on 'cognitive' pursuits, but in reality, recess provides an important opportunity to rest one part of the brain while developing the other parts," says Andrew Garner, a pediatrician in Cleveland and an expert in early brain and child development.

Another reason exercise rocks? It's a chance for kids who aren't doing so hot in class to shine. "If you're struggling in some subjects, but have time in gym class to excel,

it's a reason to keep coming back to school," Garner adds.

Schools seem to be getting the message. Many are launching movement programs to get kids up during class time. In New York City, yoga instructors go into classrooms to teach kids how to stretch. As of last fall in Chicago, all public elementary school students get at least 20 minutes of recess per day. That's a huge step: Some schools hadn't had recess in decades—or ever—says Annie Lionberger, who heads up student wellness for the city's public school system.

Strong Bods, Sharp Skills

For peak brain-and-body health, kids need to break a sweat for at least 60 minutes every day (which you can divide up), notes Garner—it keeps weight in check, wards off stress, and helps kids sleep better. The benefits don't stop there, though: Aerobic exercise, yoga, and martial arts also improve your kiddo's self-control and working memory—and turn him into a more flexible problem-solver. Besides, little kids are still developing their motor skills, which makes them fidgety. "We have to get the wiggles out," Garner adds.

In other words, there are no downsides. Here's how to work in those brain-and-body pumping moves at home—and take action if your child's school is still stuck on the notion that more desk-work equals better test scores.

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6 Perks of Exercise

• **IT BUILDS BRAINS** Activity stimulates the growth of new brain cells and connections between them.

• **IT HELPS KIDS FOCUS** A study found that kids who exercised for 20 minutes before a quiz blocked out distractions and scored better.

• **IT SHARPENS THINKING** Preschoolers who exercised 35 minutes twice a week for eight weeks processed info faster and reacted more quickly and more accurately during a test, researchers found.

• **IT BOOSTS MEMORY** Kids who are fitter are better at rote memorization and at remembering and connecting different pieces of information—a skill they need to ace tests.

• **IT EASES STRESS** A study found that kids who exercised coped more effectively with everyday school stressors like speaking in front of the class.

• **IT HELPS HEAVY KIDS SUCCEED** Obese kids face unique obstacles: They're more likely to repeat a grade and be diagnosed with ADHD or learning disabilities. Plus, low self-esteem can make problems worse. More activity during the day helps to lower BMIs and improve performance.

ACTIVATE HOMEWORK TIME Work in a 5- or 10-minute mini-recess between each assignment to clear your kid's head, says Catherine Ramstetter, co-author of the AAP's recess policy statement. Mix and match these classroom moves tonight!



CLASSROOM MOVE
Practicing self-control through active games that make kids stop, think, and then act can help them do better in class, explains Megan McClelland, an early childhood expert at Oregon State University.

STEAL IT! Try Freeze Dance: Kids boogie to fast music and dance slower to calmer music—and vice versa—and freeze when it stops. Or assign each child a slow-moving character, like an old woman, and have them race. The one who doesn't break character wins!



CLASSROOM MOVE
At Red Hawk, P.E. teacher Tanya Peal teaches the steps to popular tunes in gym class. Other teachers at the school, like Savona, often use a YouTube video so students can get the wiggles out. "We try to keep movement fun and engaging so kids have a positive experience," says Peal.

STEAL IT! Dance together Gangnam Style or film your own Harlem Shake. "The idea is to get kids' brains stimulated and ready to learn," Peal says.



CLASSROOM MOVE
After a lesson, Savona's students walk down the hall and back to class with a buddy and summarize what they've just learned. "Kids retain more if they can move their bodies, get oxygen to their brains, and bounce ideas off of each other," she says.

STEAL IT! Take a quick walk (or bike ride!) around the block with your child while you ask her to explain the math worksheet or the science chapter she just read.



CLASSROOM MOVE
Claire Angier, a K-5 teacher in Milwaukie, OR, teaches reading with a program that matches animals with body movements and letters. "Kids pretend their arm is a trunk and say, 'Ellie Elephant says e e e,'" Angier explains. "They hear the sound, see the picture, and act it out; they benefit when their brains make different connections."

STEAL IT! Make up your own movements. Start easy: Have your preschooler learn to "spell" his name with his body.



CLASSROOM MOVE
In some Chicago schools, says Lionberger, kids take the long way to lunch, going up and down the stairs while making their way to the cafeteria.

STEAL IT! If your child needs to grab a snack or take a bathroom break during schoolwork, challenge her to find the longest route and add a few laps. The extra minutes spent moving are a mental break that will pay off when she settles back into work.



CLASSROOM MOVE
Kids don't have to jump around to get their brains working. "Teachers say their students are more relaxed and focused on the days that they have yoga," says Jennifer Cohen Harper, who teaches yoga in New York City schools. Kids also say that they sleep better on days when they do yoga—a big plus for learning.

STEAL IT! Do kid-friendly stretches, like Warrior Pose and Tree Pose. "They give kids a chance to get grounded and focus," Cohen Harper says.



CLASSROOM MOVE
When the weather's bad, indoor recess in Chicago public schools now includes a hallway circuit with corners dedicated to different exercises, such as push-ups.

STEAL IT! Make each room a place for a particular animal and its movements—post a picture of a rabbit in the family room and have kids hop, for instance. Older kids can mimic athletes: In the kitchen, say, they can push up against the fridge like football linebackers.

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Easy Ways to Make a Difference in School

- 1 **Consider organizing a donation drive** to buy movement-boosting toys for recess, like chalk, jump ropes, and balls.
- 2 **Go to Action for Healthy Kids**, a site that offers resources for parents and educators across the country who want to increase activity and healthy eating at school. Check out the free Parents Are the Power online toolkit.
- 3 **Join the school or district's wellness council**, which drafts policy, says health educator Catherine Ramstetter. Or suggest that the district's superintendent apply for a government grant through the Carol M. White Physical Education Program on edu.gov. Last year, communities around the country received a total of \$27 million to expand and improve their P.E. and nutrition programs.
- 4 **Schedule a chat with the P.E. teacher.** Gym teachers can be your allies in getting a movement program off the ground, says Aaron Beighle, a physical education professor at the University of Kentucky. **P&C**

Jennifer Abbasi writes about health and science for many magazines, including *Popular Science* and *Discover*.



ARNE DUNCAN: RECESS IS A SLAM DUNK

Secretary of Education **ARNE DUNCAN** is no slouch when it comes to exercise. The former college basketball player says he was a handful as a boy unless he got plenty of activity. He chatted with **P&C** on why all students should run around in school and how parents can push for more.

It's simple: Kids need to move. "I'll walk you through the three reasons: One is, clearly, the fight against obesity. The First Lady is working hard on that. But there's also been a ton of studies linking physical activity with academic achievement. Some people like to say, we don't have time; we have to make a choice between the two. But that's wrong. Plus, the non-cognitive skills you gain through playing are tremendous—the social benefits, the chance to figure out how to negotiate, to build resilience, to fail and

ARNE DUNCAN: © JOE MURPHY/INBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

learn from that failure. When I got to run around and burn off a little steam as a kid, I could sit down and concentrate and be much more focused. And what was true for me is true for millions of kids around the country."

Parents: Use your power. "Parents have to speak up. Ask your school: Are there safe places to play? Have you thought about indoor recess in inclement weather? Then work together with teachers and administrators to

create those opportunities." (See "4 Ways to Make a Difference," right.)

Get school administrators to put a lot of value into play.

"We value reading, we value writing, and we value math, and it's really important to value all those things. But I think we also have to collectively value physical activity and play. And when things are valued, when parents' voices are heard, then really good things tend to happen."