

A growing body of evidence shows that movement isn't just good for young bodies—it's essential for young minds. In a major synthesis of over 700 studies, researchers found consistent links between physical activity and mental health among children and adolescents. Regular participation in physical activity was associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety, higher self-esteem, and better cognitive functioning. While the field has matured over the past decade, the clearest benefits appear in cognitive health, suggesting that exercise plays a direct role in supporting attention, memory, and learning.

Exercise and Emotional Well-Being

The review found moderate improvements in depressive symptoms following physical-activity interventions for youth, particularly in structured programs lasting around three months. These benefits were most evident for adolescents already struggling with depression. Evidence for anxiety reduction was smaller and more fragmented, though some studies showed positive effects from programs like yoga or team sports. Self-esteem outcomes were mixed, reflecting the complex and personal nature of self-perceptions—yet when activity experiences were positive and socially supportive, confidence gains were stronger.

Fitness for the Brain

Perhaps the most compelling evidence emerged in the area of cognitive functioning. Regular exercise was linked to improvements in executive function—skills like planning, focus, and self-control—as well as measurable changes in brain structure and activity. Children who were more physically fit tended to perform better academically and on cognitive tests. This growing field highlights that movement can enhance not only physical performance but also learning capacity and mental clarity, offering a powerful case for embedding physical activity into daily routines and school curricula.

Practical Steps to Apply the Findings

1. Build movement into routines: Encourage at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity daily—whether through sports, play, or active commuting.
2. Combine physical and mental skill work: Pair physical warmups with short visualization or breathing exercises to strengthen the body-mind connection.
3. Foster positive activity environments: Prioritize fun, teamwork, and inclusivity so youth associate movement with enjoyment and social support.
4. Track progress beyond fitness: Help children notice cognitive and emotional benefits—better focus, confidence, or mood—to reinforce motivation.

By integrating regular movement into everyday life and connecting it to personal growth, young people can build resilience, focus, and mental well-being that last well beyond the playing field.

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Reference:

Biddle, S. J. H., Ciaccioni, S., Thomas, G., & Vergeer, I. (2019). Physical activity and mental health in children and adolescents: An updated review of reviews and an analysis of causality. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 42, 146–155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.08.011>