

Developing the Magical Mind Through Movement

by Debra Em Wilson

2011, 06/02/11

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.

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 enhances 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 - 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. If your child is struggling in school, be sure to include swinging, tumbling, and movement in their daily schedule.