



Get Them Moving! Using Exercise to Improve Student Engagement

It's hard to pay attention.

Even adults find their minds wandering after 10 or 15 minutes in a meeting or lecture. In fact, recent research suggests that adult attention spans max out at about 20 minutes. That's how long the average adult can hold out before he has to take a break to renew his focus. And that's for adults who are listening *voluntarily*.

K-12 students, of course, have an even harder time. Even assuming a decent breakfast and enough sleep the night before, kids are coping with higher energy levels, less emotional maturity, and the (ahem!) often involuntary nature of schooling. Is it any wonder they get antsy long before the class period ends?

However, as an educator, you have a simple, natural tool at your disposal that can help keep students on task: exercise! Physical movement—either as part of classroom activities or as pure exercise breaks—can help burn off excess energy and restore focus, with studies pointing to improved student outcomes as a result.

In fact, in 2010, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control analyzed hundreds of studies on this topic, and published a paper about it.

One of their conclusions: In an analysis of nine studies that explored the use of brief classroom exercise breaks or movement-based classroom activities, "eight of the nine studies found positive associations between classroom-based physical activity and indicators of cognitive skills and attitudes, academic behavior, and academic achievement; none of the studies found negative associations."

So, how do you harness this research to promote better student outcomes in your classroom?

The answer: Add exercise!

There are many ways to do this. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Incorporate movement in lessons.** For instance, you might create a social studies unit requiring student "travel time" between different areas of the classroom, or present a math activity in which students line up in order,

based on calculations they perform.

- **Rethink the physical environment.** One option is to create "standing work stations" without chairs, or Makerspace areas where students study or work while standing. Other possibilities include installing standing desks, or using balance balls as seating during reading time.
- **Use regular exercise breaks.** These could include breaks for stretching, jumping-jacks or toe-touching between class periods; or, you could lead students in a brief round of chair-based calisthenics at regular intervals.
- **Use exercise to break the tension.** Studies suggest that a brief cardiovascular activity before a test can improve focus and concentration, and that physical movement—for instance, before a speech or presentation—can significantly reduce children's anxiety.

So, as you kick off 2018 with your students, remember: *Get them moving!* For more ideas on how to incorporate movement in the classroom, check out these **great titles** from Perma-Bound. For additional books for professional educators to help promote classroom management, [click here](#).

References:

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