



Heart Disease and Stroke. You're the Cure.

FACTS

Teaching America's Kids a Healthy Lifestyle

Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds

OVERVIEW

Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. In 2004, more than 9 million children and adolescents ages six to 19 were considered overweight.¹ The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that by 2010, 20% of children in the U.S. will be obese. Some experts claim that by 2015, as these children are growing up, 75% of adults will be overweight with 41% obese.^{2,3} The estimated annual cost of overweight and obesity in 2002 was \$132 billion.¹ These health care costs cannot be sustained.

A decline in physical activity has contributed to the unprecedented epidemic of childhood obesity.⁴ One important way to address this decline is through strong physical education programs in our nation's schools. To arrest the rise in obesity, children must be physically active during the school day and learn about keeping healthy through exercise and eating a balanced diet.

Research shows that healthy children learn more effectively and achieve more academically.⁵ If the lessons of lifetime physical activity and healthy food and beverage choices are modeled at home and reinforced in school, children will have the optimal foundation for healthy living.⁶

CHILDREN NEED DAILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Obesity is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease (CVD), cancer, diabetes, and early death. However, children are currently not getting enough physical activity to counter the obesity epidemic.

- In 2005, the Government Accountability Office released a report discussing key strategies to include in programs designed to target childhood obesity. Experts agreed "increasing physical activity" was the most important component of any such program.⁷
- The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that children engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week.⁸ Because half their day is spent in school, they should get 30 minutes of exercise time during the school day.
- There is strong public support for more physical education in schools: 81% of adults believe daily physical education should be mandatory.⁹
- Only 3.8% of elementary, 7.9% of middle, and 2.1% of high schools provide daily physical education or its equivalent for the entire school year. Twenty-two percent of schools do not require students to take any physical education at all.¹⁰
- Only 27% of schools require health education in grade six, 10% in grade nine, and 2% in grade 12.¹¹ Children are not receiving comprehensive education on living a healthy life.
- A comprehensive community-based intervention that increased opportunities for physical activity before, during, and after school successfully reversed obesity in children.¹²
- Normal-weight adolescents have a significantly lower risk than overweight adolescents of developing and dying from coronary heart disease in adulthood.¹³

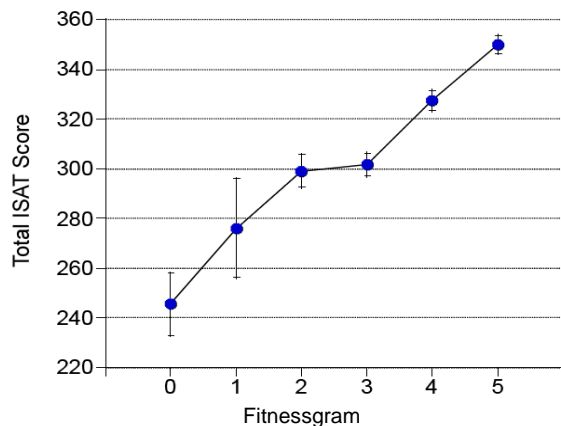
ACTIVE CHILDREN THRIVE ACADEMICALLY AND SOCIALLY

Physically active and educated children are more likely to thrive academically and socially. Through effective physical education, children learn how to incorporate safe and healthy activities into their lives. Physical education is an integral part of developing the "whole" child in social settings and the learning environment.

- Evidence suggests that physical activity has a positive impact on cognitive ability, tobacco use, insomnia, depression, and anxiety.¹⁴ Normal-weight children also have lower rates of school absenteeism than obese children.¹⁵
- Recent studies have found a strong correlation between aerobic fitness and academic performance as measured by grades in core subjects and standardized test scores.^{16,17}
- Several large-scale studies found improvements in students' academic performance with increased time spent in physical education. Children who spent time in physical education in place of a classroom activity performed no worse academically than students not enrolled in physical education.⁵

Research suggests that exercise may help brain cells regenerate in adults.¹⁸

Physical Fitness & Achievement Test Performance*



Source: Hillman CH, Erickson K I, Kramer A F Be smart, exercise your heart: Exercise effects on brain and cognition. *Nat Rev Neurosci*, 2008;9,58-65.

CHILDREN NEED QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The quality of a school's physical education classes is as important as their frequency if children are to reap the full benefits of regular physical activity. Quality programs based on national and state standards that provide professional development, adequate resources, and sufficient space for physical education and activities are key to this effort.

- Principals and physical education teachers need adequate resources to do their jobs at a high level. Just as reading, math, and science teachers get the professional development they need, physical education teachers require support.
- Schools need adequate space and facilities to conduct supervised, structured physical activity and physical education.

AHA ADVOCATES FOR FIT KIDS

AHA strongly advocates for daily, quality physical education in our nation's schools, together with other healthy lifestyle choices. It is an important part of a student's educational program and a way to improve lifelong health, well-being, and academic success. AHA supports the Fitness Integrated with Teaching Kids Act (FIT Kids Act, H.R.325/S.2173), which would:

- Hold schools accountable for providing students with high-quality physical education and activity every day
- Involve parents in keeping children healthy and active
- Provide physical education teachers with the professional development and support they need to boost their students' abilities to learn
- Fund research to support effective ways to combat childhood obesity and improve the overall health and well-being of children

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