

What Do You Know About PE for Kids?

WebMD Feature by Ellen Greenlaw

Do you worry that physical education classes take precious time away from your kids' studies? Then you should know what the research shows. According to a 2010 CDC review of 50 studies spanning 23 years, children who are physically fit and active often do better in the classroom than those who aren't active. Physical activity increases blood flow and oxygen to the brain and may boost the growth of nerve cells in the hippocampus -- the brain's center of learning and memory.

Phys. Ed. classes offer kids many other benefits as well. So what goes on in these classes? And what can you do if your child hates gym class? WebMD asked health experts to answer questions you may have about PE.

What's Being Taught In PE?

You might be surprised. The old standbys -- volleyball, soccer, and basketball -- are still around. But many school gym classes have also branched out to help kids discover other physical activities that they may enjoy for a lifetime.

"The more innovative kids' physical education classes are teaching a wider variety of skills these days," says Cheryl Richardson, senior program manager for physical education for the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. "Gym classes might include skateboarding, rock climbing, or in-line skating."

The newer activities can draw in kids who aren't interested in traditional competitive sports. "A PE program should deliver activities that kids at all levels can enjoy," says Jenna Johnson, an exercise physiologist at Sanford Health in Fargo, N.D. "The goal is to expose them to activities they might not otherwise experience and help develop their skills in a non-threatening way."

Why Are Gym and Recess So Important?

"Physical education in schools is one of the most important ways to help fight childhood obesity," says Joseph A. Zenel, MD, executive director of medical education at Sanford Health and professor of pediatrics at the Sanford School of Medicine in Sioux Falls, S.D. "Because kids are in school for so much of the day, it's a great opportunity to have a real impact on their overall physical activity."

But many schools have scaled back or eliminated PE classes to save money. Schools are also under pressure to decrease PE time and instead increase math, English, and science instruction to improve their students' standards-based test scores.

Why Are Gym and Recess So Important?

A study in 2000 found that only about 6% of high schools and middle schools and 8% of elementary schools with PE requirements provide year-round daily PE instruction for all grades. And although the National Association of State Boards of Education recommends 150 minutes of PE per week for elementary school children, a study of third-graders found that 33 minutes a week was more common.

"This is too bad because PE and recess offer many benefits to kids," Johnson says.

Some of these benefits include:

- **Higher grades.** Studies have shown that children who spend more time being active at school may have better grades and do better on standardized tests. Experts believe that physical activity may help concentration and behavior and improve academic achievement.
- **Better sleep.** "Getting enough sleep is really important for kids," Zenel says. "And being more active during the day is a great way to help kids sleep better at night."
- **Social skills.** PE class and recess offer a less-structured time for children to develop social skills. "These are often the only times during the school day when children can interact with one another and learn to work out problems on their own," Richardson tells WebMD.
- **Lifelong fitness habits.** Physical education classes help kids experience the joys of being active. "If we can expose kids to different activities when they're young, it's more likely they'll stay physically active as adults," Zenel says.
- **Better self-esteem.** Being involved in physical activity makes kids feel good and can help improve their confidence and self-esteem.

What Are the Signs of a Quality PE Program?

First, the students shouldn't be standing around. PE classes should keep kids active for at least 50% or more of the time they are in class.

It's also important that there is enough equipment for every child to use and that the instructor is qualified to teach PE.

My Child Doesn't Like PE Class. What Can I Do to Help?

Having fun is the ultimate goal, says Richardson. If your child isn't having a good time, try these strategies:

- **Ask your child what he doesn't like about PE.** Then you can talk with his PE teacher to try to find something he will enjoy. "The PE teacher's job is to ensure that every child is successful at his or her own level," Richardson says.
- **Find out what your child is doing in PE and help her practice those skills at home.** Simple activities, such as kicking or throwing a ball with your child, can help build her confidence.
- **Be a role model.** By being active with your child, you can show him that it's fun to exercise.
- **Encourage your child to stick with it.** If she really hates PE, you may be tempted to have her excused from gym classes. But experts say it's not a good idea. "Instead, we encourage parents to work with their child and the school to find an activity the child can participate in," Richardson says.

What's Better for My Child, PE or Playing Sports?

"The goal of team sports is very different from the goal of PE," Richardson says. "Team sports prepare children to play one sport. Physical education gives kids a wider variety of skills to help them learn to live an active lifestyle."

PE also provides a chance for children to work together with kids who have different abilities and different interests. So rather than choosing sports over PE, it's a good idea to encourage both.

How Can Parents Advocate for PE in School?

If you are concerned that your child is not getting any PE instruction or not enough, talk to his teacher and the school principal. Here are some other ways you can advocate for quality PE time:

- Join a school committee or council devoted to creating a strong health curriculum.
- Help your school raise money for PE instruction.
- Visit PE4life.org to learn about advocating for an innovative PE curriculum at your school.
- Emphasize physical activity at home.