

# Incorporate Physical Wellness

## Introduction

Years of research demonstrates there is a two-way relationship between mental and physical health. Movement, physical fitness, and a nutritious diet are all examples of individual factors that support one's mental health. Through purposeful design decisions, schools can support physical wellness and, in turn, overall wellness. This could involve incorporating standards-based health education, providing and promoting opportunities for physical activity, providing nutritious foods, and ensuring access to health services within the school or through community partnerships.

## Guidance to Get You Started

- **Ensure you provide varied opportunities for students to move their bodies** within and beyond the school day. Research suggests children under the age of six should move their bodies for at least 3 hours a day, whereas children and teenagers from six to eighteen should have at least 60 minutes of exercise per day. School-based programs to increase physical activity can include physical education (with a variety of offerings), daily recess, and incorporation of physical activity into regular classroom time through active lesson or movement breaks. Offering programs before and after school, such as organized sports, can also help keep students active and build lifelong habits.
- **Incorporate health standards and topics** into the curriculum. Depending on students' developmental stage, these standards and topics could include physical development, health promotion, disease prevention, factors impacting health-related decisions, ability to advocate for one's own health, and other critical topics.
- **Provide healthy food at meal and snack times** and help students build healthy eating habits through discussions of healthy eating and practice with picking healthy foods and eating mindfully.
- **Ensure access to health services** such as general practitioner services, dentistry and orthodontics, mental health services, disease prevention, substance use and abuse, family planning, and more. When services can not be provided by a school directly, partnerships with medical providers in the local community can help give students and families access to the resources and support they need.

## A Look at Some Benefits

### Environment Within and Beyond School

Indirectly prepares learners to manage and navigate their own health and physical well-being in the larger environment beyond school.

### Individual Factors

Directly cultivates physical health and well-being, an individual factor that promotes mental health.

### Relationships with Others

Indirectly supports more positive relationships by fostering general well-being and positive emotions.

Research suggests that incorporating physical movements and healthy habits into the school day may promote:

- Reduced anxiety by making the brain's "fight or flight" system less reactive (Anderson & Shivamakar, 2013)
- Reduced depression and increased mood (in some cases found to be as effective as medication or psychotherapy) (Cooney et al., 2013)
- Altered brain structures, which can in turn reduce stress, depression, and anxiety, and lead to a feeling of well-being; this outcome is particularly associated with meditative activities such as yoga (Rhodes, Spinazzola, & van de Kolk, 2016)

## Additional Resources to Explore

### *Increasing Physical Education and Physical Activity in Schools*

A framework published by the CDC in 2017 to support the planning and implementation of strategies that increase physical education and activity in schools.

### *Action for Healthy Kids*

An organization focused on making schools healthier places with resources on topics like supporting healthy eating and implementing a school-wide health program.

### *Game On Activity Library*

Action for Healthy Kids' library of activities for mental and physical well-being, which includes activities like movement breaks, journaling, mindful eating, gardening, and more.