

SCIENCE & WELLNESS

Sitting All Day Doesn't (and Shouldn't) Work for Young Scholars

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I recall a very funny bit by Jerry Seinfeld who described how parents and other adults always use the word “down” to direct kids: calm down, slow down, sit down. The whole concept of keeping our kids calm and controlled, particularly in the classroom, is now being proven wrong by science. Because of this latest information, classrooms look very different than in previous generations as educators turn to innovative approaches to help children learn.

The average American student sits at school for about four and a half hours a day. Add that to the hours they sit staring at screens – computers, iPads, phones, or television – and we find that our kids are sitting 85 percent of the time they are awake. That is a lot of sitting.

Up until now, it was believed that children needed to sit still in order to concentrate and succeed in school. But experts today find that kids are not wired to sit all day long. Instead, they benefit from breaks in which they are physically moving to help energize their brains and be more productive in the classroom. One teacher said that she watches her third graders struggle to sit still throughout the day. Even during short lessons, they are fidgeting and moving around the classroom.

Reasons Movement Is Better

Many studies in recent years have helped educators realize that forcing children to sit still is not the best approach; instead, moving around enhances their educational experience. A 2013 report from the Institute of Medicine found that children who are more active show greater attention, have faster cognitive processing speed, and perform better on standardized tests than children who are less active. According to a New York Times article, John Ratey, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the author of “Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain,” said, “Movement activates all the brain cells kids are

using to learn, it wakes up the brain.” Moving around stimulates more blood vessels in the brain to support the creation of new brain cells. Finally, low-level movement like standing improves students’ attention and alertness because their blood circulation and oxygenation levels increase.

Movement breaks in the classroom also help address childhood obesity and the many other health concerns attributed to low physical activity since play time has been dramatically reduced for reasons like increased technology use. As we know, extensive medical evidence shows that regular physical activity is related to lower body fat, greater muscular strength, stronger bones, and improvements in cardiovascular and metabolic health. It also helps reduce anxiety and depression.

Changes In Classrooms To Encourage Movement

Educators are beginning to look for alternatives to the current classroom environment to improve how children learn. More and more schools are bringing active learning styles into the classroom including movement breaks, standing desks, and yoga ball seats. Not every option will work for each student, so it is helpful to try different approaches to see what is most successful.

Movement Breaks

I don’t know about you, but my kids won’t stop talking about [GoNoodle](#). Now used in more than 60,000 elementary schools in the United States, it is one of several creative online programs that teachers are using to give their students active breaks throughout the school day. The idea is that kids need time between lessons to move around and give their minds a rest. Plus, if these breaks are done a few times a day, that can add up to an extra hour of movement per week.

The unique aspect about these types of programs is that they are not intended to be focused solely on exercise. Instead, they are aimed to entertain the students while at the same time getting them up and moving. For example, GoNoodle videos have kids running alongside their desks through a virtual obstacle course or following along with dance moves. The kids are laughing and having a blast without even realizing they are getting exercise. According to the chief executive and a co-founder of GoNoodle, by investing three to five minutes for our kids to move in the classroom, students can learn more effectively for the next 45 minutes.

Other movement break programs include [Just Dance Kids](#), [BrainErgizers](#) from the National Association of Physical Literacy, and more listed on the “[Let’s Move! Active Schools](#)” site.

Standing Desks

Another new trend in classrooms to encourage movement is standing desks. These are raised desks that can be adjusted to each child’s height and comfort needs. My children now have a couple of standing desks in their classrooms, which is a big change from just a year ago. My son says he enjoys occasionally going over to the standing desk to get work done if he feels like his legs can’t stay still.

Standing desks have been proven to be beneficial to children from both health and learning perspectives. A report in [Pediatrics](#) reviewed eight studies showing how standing desks in classrooms decreased sitting time by about an hour each day. Some of the studies also found that this increased physical activity improved the students’ behavior.

Next, a study in the [International Journal of Health Promotion and Education](#), published by scientists at Texas A&M, found that students who used standing desks were more engaged in the classroom than those who sat during class. Nearly 300 children in second through fourth grades were observed during the school year. Their engagement level was measured by behaviors like answering a question, raising their hands, or participating in discussions. Researchers found a 12 percent rise in engagement by students using standing desks, which adds up to an extra seven minutes per hour of effective instruction time.

Finally, a study by [Loughborough University](#) in Great Britain assessed a class of 9 and 10-year-olds who used standing desks. The teacher rotated the children around to ensure that they were exposed to the desks for at least one hour a day. The study found that overall classroom sitting time dropped by about 52 minutes per day, and teachers commented that the students’ concentration, attention to task, and general behavior showed significant improvement.

Standing desks are becoming so popular now that organizations focusing on their benefits and use are sprouting up. [Stand Up Kids](#) and [JustStand.org](#) are both great resources to learn more about this effective classroom option.

Yoga Balls Seats

Yoga balls are also popping up more in classrooms. They stabilize the core, promote better posture, and allow students to move and bounce around a bit at their work station when they feel antsy. Kids can essentially get a mini-workout just by sitting on the yoga ball while they do their work. According to an article in [California Educator](#), teachers have noticed that the yoga balls decrease unwanted movement while students' attention spans have risen. The children are thrilled with their yoga chairs because they have more freedom to move around.

What Parents Can Do

Some school districts have not yet added these inventive movement options to their curriculum for various reasons such as funding and time constraints. It may take parents advocating – and sometimes donating their own money – in order to push schools to bring these options into the classroom.

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