

Activity Breaks

A Promising Strategy for Keeping Children Physically Active at School

The importance of physical activity in the school setting is well-recognized.¹⁻⁴ Many organizations, including the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, emphasize the need for multiple strategies to help students be active in school.²

This brief examines the percentage of schools that provide physical activity breaks outside of physical education class and recess, including breaks for stretching, yoga, and other movement during and between classroom activities. It also examines the type and total duration of breaks and whether the use of activity breaks varies by school characteristics or by provision of other opportunities for activity.

Introduction

Almost one-third of children ages 6 to 11—those typically in elementary school—are overweight or obese,⁵ and lack of physical activity contributes to the epidemic.¹ Regular physical activity promotes health⁴ and has been shown to improve students' academic performance,⁶⁻⁹ as well as their ability to concentrate and focus on classroom tasks.¹⁰⁻¹²

Many leading public health organizations recognize the important role schools play in helping children be active,¹⁻⁴ and suggest that children engage in at least 30 minutes of physical activity—or half of the recommended 60 minutes per day—during the school day.^{1,4} These organizations recommend a variety of strategies to support physical activity in schools, including physical education, recess, classroom breaks and after-school programs. Currently, many schools do not meet national guidelines for physical activity practices. In 2009–10, only 22 percent of U.S. public elementary students attended a school that offered at least 150 minutes of physical education class time per week and 71 percent attended a school that offered at least 20 minutes of daily recess,¹³ which are standards set by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education.^{14,15} Yet, research shows that there are other promising strategies to help children be active at school. For example, classroom-based physical activity breaks can increase students' physical activity levels¹⁶ and improve their on-task behavior.^{17,18}

This brief examines the use of classroom-based activity breaks in elementary schools, describes the type and duration of breaks provided, and evaluates whether activity breaks differ by school characteristics. It also examines whether offering activity breaks is associated with schools meeting or not meeting guidelines for other physical activity opportunities, such as recess and physical education. Data were drawn from surveys of 1,278 school administrators at nationally representative samples of U.S. public elementary schools during the 2009–10 and 2010–11 school years.



Key Findings

Many schools offered activity breaks, and those breaks included various types of physical activities.

- In the 2009–10 and 2010–11 school years, 25 percent of public elementary schools provided activity breaks for students. This did not differ between the two years.
- The total amount of time dedicated to activity breaks averaged 39 minutes per week. The types of activity breaks offered by schools varied considerably and included: whole-school activities, such as a regular lunchtime running club, and individual classroom activities, such as stretching breaks or walking outside, that were left to teachers' discretion.
- Several respondents indicated that teachers were “encouraged” to use activity breaks in the classroom. Most often, activity breaks occurred in classroom settings, with activities such as stretching, yoga or jumping jacks. The program most frequently cited by name was Brain Gym®, mentioned specifically by 13 percent of schools that offered activity breaks. Other programs mentioned included TAKE 10!® and the JAMmin' Minute®.

Activity breaks were not associated with the amount of recess, but were associated with physical education time.

- Schools that met the national recommendation for recess (at least 20 minutes of daily recess) were *not* less likely to offer activity breaks.

- Schools that offered at least 90 minutes of physical education per week were *not* less likely to offer activity breaks. However, schools that met the national recommendation for physical education (at least 150 minutes of physical education per week) were less likely to offer activity breaks.
 - Among schools that offered at least 150 minutes of physical education per week, 16 percent offered activity breaks, compared with 26 percent among schools that offered fewer than 150 minutes of physical education per week. Activity breaks did not compete with physical education among schools that offered moderate amounts (90 minutes per week) of physical education, but schools were less likely to provide activity breaks if they also offered the optimal amount of physical education.

Use of activity breaks did not differ by school characteristics.

- The prevalence of schools that offered activity breaks did not vary by school characteristics, including: U.S. census region; locale (city, suburb, town, rural); student race and ethnicity; or socioeconomic characteristics (the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals).
- The length of school day was not associated with whether schools offered activity breaks.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Only one in four U.S. public elementary schools offered students physical activity breaks apart from physical education class and recess during the 2009–11 school years. Students in schools that offered physical activity breaks received an average of almost 40 minutes per week in such breaks. Generally, the scheduling and use of activity breaks were left up to teachers, though some schools did encourage such practices.

Although most schools do not offer activity breaks, evidence suggests that students and teachers may benefit from such breaks. Previous studies have shown that offering students activity breaks during classes increases their levels of physical activity.¹⁷ Studies also confirm that allocating school time for physical activity does not adversely affect students' academic performance.^{6–9} Further, scheduling brief activity breaks could be a promising strategy for promoting physical activity during the school day without creating additional challenges for teachers, administrators and students. This is crucial given that schools already have budget constraints, limited staffing resources and many competing demands for time during the school day.

Currently, very few school districts require physical activity opportunities to be provided throughout the school day.¹⁹ Research has demonstrated the importance of state laws and school district policies for promoting physical activity opportunities at school. A recent study found that schools are significantly more likely to meet physical education recommendations when state laws and school district policies mandate 150 minutes of weekly physical education.²⁰ As such, policies that encourage regular classroom-based activity breaks may help more schools provide adequate opportunities for students to be active.

Further research is needed to identify strategies for implementing classroom-based activity breaks and providing teachers with the skills and confidence necessary to engage students. In addition, questions remain about the optimal duration, timing and programming (e.g., types of activities) for physical activity breaks.

Study Overview

These analyses are based on data collected by the Bridging the Gap research program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. We used nationally representative data from surveys of U.S. public elementary schools collected during the 2009–10 and 2010–11 school years to examine the prevalence and characteristics of activity breaks. In the spring of each school year, we sent a survey to the school administrator. Responses were received from 1,278 schools (61% response rate). Survey respondents were asked to indicate “does your school provide students opportunities to be physically active during the school day, other than in PE and recess?” Response options were yes and no. If yes, respondents were asked to describe the breaks and indicate how many minutes per week third-grade students were active in those breaks. Information about this study is available at www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/research/elementary_school_survey

Suggested Citation

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. The program identifies and tracks information at the state, community and school levels; measures change over time; and shares findings that will help advance effective solutions for reversing the childhood obesity epidemic and preventing young people from smoking. Bridging the Gap is a joint project of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute for Health Research and Policy and the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegap.org

Endnotes

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